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"STANDING AGAINST THE SILENT FOUNTAIN WAS THE WOMAN IN GRAY."

WHY I MARRIED HIM?

Or, THE WOMAN IN GRAY.

BY SARA CLAXTON.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGER.

I REMEMBER that night as well as though it

were yesterday. It was that on which Mrs. Harding, the housekeeper, had told me the legend of the curse.

It was just the place and just the night for such a legend. A low-ceiled room, with a great beam across, dark wainscoted walls, a great carved fireplace, before which I could picture Elizabethan ladies in ruffs and farthingales sitting on winter nights, ponderous oak furniture, deep-mullioned windows with small, latticed

panes—and all this seen in the dim light of a wet summer evening.

Outside there was a leaden sky, and a steady rain was falling; and the drip, drip from the eaves and gable-ends of the old Tudor house, was a most appropriate accompaniment to the words she was uttering.

Lost in the wonder of it, I made no comment when she had finished, but sat staring out of the window at the little globules of rain that hung from the point of every leaf.

Suddenly I started; for, all in an instant, a human form had come between my eyes and the pendulous drops.

There was nothing very terrible in the figure. It was that of a slim young man in a light waterproof coat, his head covered by a broad-brimmed white hat of soft felt, and in his hand a camp-stool and a small case.

As I have said, there was nothing to startle me in such an apparition; but at that moment, in the overwrought condition of my nerves, I believe the sight of a hare or a rabbit scudding across the grass would have made me start.

"What is the matter, my lady?" cried Mrs. Harding, all of a tremor, for the story had made her as nervous as it had me.

"There's a stranger," I said, pointing.

But by this time I had quite recovered my presence of mind.

"What does he want, I wonder?" she said.

"Go and see, Mrs. Harding," I answered.

She went out into the hall, the door of which was open, and stood upon the step.

Too restless to be left alone, I followed, but loitered behind in the shadows, where, however, I could see and hear all that passed.

Upon perceiving the housekeeper, the stranger advanced, and politely raised his hat.

"I beg ten thousand pardons, madam," he said, with rather a strong foreign accent, "but can you direct me to any inn or place where I may get a bed for the night? I have no doubt you will think both my intrusion and my question a great liberty. I am an artist on a sketching tour, and for the last two hours have been sitting underneath a tree sketched this glorious old mansion, as it appeared half-buried in foliage. For a long time my leafy covering withstood the pelting of the pitiless rain; but it had to give way at last, and, when the drops began to fall upon my back, I thought it time to retire. Then I found I had wandered out of the road, and had not the slightest conception where I was. I could make nobody hear at the lodge, so walked on in the hope of meeting a gardener or some one."

This long speech was given with an easy politeness that evinced the man of good breeding.

But his voice! I had never heard any so

beautiful in man or woman before; it was one of those sympathetic voices whose tones go straight to the very soul.

His countenance, too, was very handsome. Dark-eyed, delicately chiseled, of a thoroughly aristocratic type; and a smile, almost as fascinating as his voice, was playing over his lips while he spoke.

Almost unconsciously I had come forward, and now stood just behind Mrs. Harding, drawn irresistibly, I believe, by the sweetness of his tones. And these and his pleasant smile were not without effect upon the housekeeper.

"Really, sir," she said, "you will have a long walk to the nearest inn; it is nearly four miles."

"Oh, I don't mind that, if I find good quarters when I get there," he answered, cheerfully.

"The 'Avondell Arms,' I believe, gives very good accommodation to travelers. It bears the name of our house, and has always been patronized by the family," replied the old lady, sententiously.

"Is this house called Avondell?" inquired the stranger.

"Yes, sir; this is Avondell," replied the housekeeper, proudly. "It is a well-known name, and has been from the time of bluff King Hal, when this house was built. You'll find a deal about it in the county history."

"It is a glorious old place," he said, scanning the fine old porch, the mullioned windows, and the ivy-covered walls with the appreciation of a true taste. "I must have another day's study of it before I leave. Thank you very much for your information."

Here he caught sight of me, and fixed upon me a gaze, the intensity of which made my eyes drop and my cheeks burn, although its admiration was utterly free from rudeness. He again raised his hat, said "Good-night, ladies," and was gone.

"What a very nice man—quite like a gentleman; and what a sweet voice!" remarked the housekeeper, as we went back to the room.

I made no reply.

But, a few minutes afterward, I observed, "In the old days that I have read about, we should not have turned a stranger away from the door, but have offered him hospitality."

"Avondell was always famed for hospitality," replied Mrs. Harding. "But then, things are so changed."

"Not for the better, I am afraid," I answered.

"Had there been a master, and a house full of servants, and everything as it used to be—but we could not have taken a stranger of whom we knew nothing into the house, my lady; it would not have been proper."

"I suppose not," I answered.

All that evening I could not get the silvery tones and handsome features of the stranger out of my thoughts.

And it seemed I was not the only person he had so impressed. I could not remain by myself in that great, lonely room, especially after the story I had heard, and so begged Mrs. Harding to sit with me.

All of a sudden, after a long silence, she looked up, and said, "Do you know, my lady, I have been puzzling myself about that stranger."

"Indeed!" I said.

"It seems to me I have seen him somewhere before to-night, or some one very like him, but I cannot for the life of me tell where or when."

As she left me at my bed-chamber door, she remarked, "You look pale and low-spirited, my lady. It's that dreadful legend. I am sorry I told it to you. But you must not put any confidence in such superstition—I don't; and I'm sure no wicked curse could fall upon such an innocent young head as yours. Besides, you are not of the direct line. Don't let such thoughts worry you."

"Oh, no; I'm not at all superstitious—only a little dull," I replied, smiling faintly.

But the tenderness of her voice and manner so touched me that I threw my arms round her neck, and kissed her as though she had been my mother.

As she went up the stairs, I heard her mutter to herself, "I oughtn't to have told her; I am sure I've done wrong. Plague on my tongue; it always does run away with me."

I certainly did feel nervous and timid, although I had my maid to sleep in the room with me, and slumber did not come for a long time. I kept wondering whether the stranger had found the inn; then bits of the house-keeper's story would cross my mind, until the two ideas became strangely jumbled together, like the incongruous images of a dream.

There was a strange, vague feeling upon me, like a shadow. "*Was it the shadow of the curse?*" I thought.

CHAPTER II.

THE WOMAN IN GRAY.

A BRIGHT sunny morning dispelled the shadows of the night, and as I strolled into the woods for a walk before breakfast, I felt half ashamed of my superstitious fears of the dark hours.

There was a cloudless blue sky above my head; the air was cool and refreshing after the rain; and a sweet, damp smell rose from the earth and the dead leaves.

As I was returning to the house by a narrow pathway, quite over-arched by trees, I saw

advancing toward me a tall, gaunt-looking woman.

Her clothing seemed to be little more than an old ragged gray dress, draggled with mud, and clinging to her as though it had recently been soaked with rain, and a thin old shawl, out of which all color had faded. Her head was uncovered, and her gray hair struggled from the knot into which it was twisted at the back, about her face and neck.

Her features, tanned by exposure to the atmosphere, were as swarthy as a Gipsy's; and there was a strange, wild look about her deep-set black eyes that gave a suspicion of insanity.

I was very much startled at this grim apparition, and would have avoided it by a retreat had I not perceived that it had caught sight of me.

"Some poor beggar-woman," I thought, feeling if I had my purse in my pocket, and advancing with as bold an aspect as I could summon, although my heart was beating fast. I found a shilling loose in my pocket, and, armed with this, I thought I was safe.

She was now leaning against a tree, evidently waiting for me. All of a tremble, I stretched out my hand with the shilling in it as I came up to her.

She made no movement to take it, but drew herself up with a haughty air.

"Have I asked you for alms?" she demanded.

"No; I—I beg your pardon," I said, feeling my face all on fire. "But I—I—"

I could not find a finish for the sentence.

"When your dainty ladyship saw my ragged clothes," said the strange woman, with bitter irony, "you said to yourself, 'Here is some horrid tramp; I must give her a shilling, because I'm afraid she'll molest me. But if I'd come to your door when you had your servants about you, you would have told them to drive me away.'"

"Indeed I should not," I replied, earnestly, becoming very frightened, and yet afraid to move, for she held me as did the Ancient Mariner the Wedding Guest—by the "glittering eye."

"You, no doubt, think yourself very beautiful," she went on, eying me with a look of scornful superiority; "but I have had dolls when I was a child much prettier than you. I was beautiful once, and men that would not have bestowed a second glance on you have knelt at my feet for a touch of my fingers."

"She is mad," I thought, and I could feel my limbs almost sinking beneath me.

What could I do? If I ran, she would overtake me. Oh, how I prayed that the gardener or some of the servants would pass this way!

"Fancy men sighing at my feet. Why

they would shudder at the sight of me now!" she cried, with a bitter laugh, that made my blood run cold.

Then, with a sudden change of tone and look—"As you do now; but as I am, so may you be one day, dainty as you are!"

The extraordinary creature paused as though she expected some answer; but my tongue was cleaving to my mouth. I could not speak. I could only glance piteously up and down the paths.

Folding her arms upon her breast, she surveyed me with the same look of scorn her countenance had worn but a moment before.

"Had a vagabond like I am now used such language to me when I was your age, I would have struck her. You can only tremble with fright. Don't be afraid; I shall not harm you. Give me your shilling and go, poor chicken heart!"

I was only too glad to hand her the coin, and hurry away.

I had not gone many paces before I heard her strident voice calling after me.

"What is the name of the house I see among the trees?"

"Avondell," I replied, without turning.

I heard a shriek from her lips, and then a peremptory "Come back!"

But, once started, fear gave me wings, and my feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground as I fled on.

As I came to a turn in the path, which the next moment would bring me in sight of the house, I could not forbear glancing round.

The woman was standing just where I had left her, like one transfixed; but as she caught my glance, she raised one of her skinny arms, and shook it threateningly.

I had not gone many steps further when I almost ran against Sampson, the gardener. Then I felt safe, and stopped to take breath.

"Any thing the matter, my lady?" he inquired, touching his hat. "You look a little fearsome."

"Yes; I have been frightened by a woman. I think she's mad," I answered.

"Where is she, my lady?"

I walked with him to the spot where I had last looked round; but she had vanished.

"A moment ago," I said, "she was standing close to that tree," pointing to a large oak, whose gnarled roots rose high out of the ground. "But do not be rough with the poor creature," I added; for Sampson was running toward the spot I indicated, looking about on all sides, and the next moment turned in among the trees, and I lost sight of him.

While I was at breakfast, Sampson sent in word by the maid, who was waiting, that although he had searched the woods in all directions he could not find any stranger.

I was glad to hear it; for if the poor creature

was indeed out of her senses, I should have been very much grieved to have heard she had been treated with any roughness.

I resolved, however, not to take lonely walks through the woods for the future. As a matter of course I told Mrs. Harding of my adventure, and it put her into great indignation.

"Why, my dear lady, she might have murdered you, and got away just as she has now! I do hate those low tramps! Let me catch any of 'em about here again, and I'll send for the constable! Deary, deary me, what an escape you've had!"

Unknown to me, she sent the men-servants about the neighborhood to endeavor to discover the woman; but no one had noticed such a personage, and no trace of her was to be found, which I thought rather remarkable, as such a strange-looking being could not fail to attract any one's attention.

But the adventures of the day were as yet far from being finished.

While I was sitting reading at the open window, a little before luncheon-time, my maid, looking very white and scared, rushed into the room, exclaiming, "Oh, my lady! my lady! Johnson, the game-keeper, has been and shot somebody!"

"Oh, heavens! not the woman?" I cried, my thoughts instantly reverting to her.

"Oh, no, my lady; it is a man!"

"He is not killed?"

"I don't know! They are bringing him up to the house!"

And at that moment I heard a trampling of heavy feet upon the gravel; and looking through the window, saw four men bearing a body between them.

Before I could take a second glance, I felt a trembling hand grasp my arm, and draw me away from the window.

It was Mrs. Harding's.

"Don't look—don't look, my lady!" she said.

"Who is it? Is he dead? How did it happen?" I asked faintly.

"I don't know any thing about it! Oh, dear! oh, dear!" exclaimed the old lady, wringing her hands.

I heard the heavy feet mount the steps without, then shuffle along the hall.

An irresistible curiosity drew me to the door, and as my eyes fell upon the white, lifeless face that hung forward upon the blood-stained chest, I recognized the stranger who had inquired his way on the previous night.

I could only articulate the word "Dead?" with an inquiring glance of terror.

"No, my lady; he ain't quite dead," replied one of the men.

"Thank Heaven!" I ejaculated. "Take a horse, one of you, and ride off for Dr. Graham! Don't lose a moment!"

"Now, my lady, if you'll leave everything to me, I'll see that all is done that can be done," said Mrs. Harding, who had by this time recovered something of her nerve, leading me back into the room. "I can dress a wound with any surgeon, and you may trust to me till the doctor comes. But if you don't calm yourself after all the excitement you've passed through this morning, you'll be ill."

I was not so silly as not to perceive the truth of her advice, and endeavor to profit by it. But I could not in any way compose myself until I received a message that there was no danger—that the shot had lodged in his shoulder, but no vital part had been touched.

Relieved from immediate anxiety by this report, my sympathies for the unfortunate man burst forth in another direction, and I ordered that the gamekeeper who had fired the shot should be brought before me.

I had not liked this man from the first; he was a big, burly, uncouth-looking fellow, and as he entered the room there was a dogged, sullen expression upon his face—an evident unconcern about the accident, that quite exasperated me; and, speaking very sharply, I demanded how it had occurred.

"'Twas all his own fault," replied the fellow, sulkily; "he was trespassing. What did he want perched up in a tree? How should I know he was there? I fired at a bird, and he got the shot. 'Twill be a lesson to 'im, and it serves him right!"

The insolent brutality of these words, and the tone in which they were uttered, filled me with disgust and indignation.

But I answered very quietly, telling him to go to the steward and receive what wages were due to him, and never set foot upon the estate any more. I shall never forget the astonished look he cast upon me when I had finished speaking.

"What, my lady, you discharge *me*?" he cried. "Why, I've been on this land ever since I was a boy, and my father afore me, and his father afore him; and you turn me off for a mere accident?"

"I do not turn you off for the accident, but for your brutal speech," I answered. "I would not have you in my service another hour on any consideration."

I had never felt so relentless against any person in my life as I did against this man.

I saw the hot color mount into his sunburnt cheeks, and an evil expression come into his small, deep-set eyes, as he turned insolently upon his heels, muttering words, of which I only caught something about "upstart," and "a disgrace to the old family."

My outward calm was only a mask covering the excitement that burned within. I could not brook the insults of this ruffian, and,

firing up, called out, peremptorily, "Come back!"

He turned round.

"Beg my pardon for your insolence."

He hesitated a moment, but there was something in my look—I am sure my eyes were flashing and my cheeks as red as fire—that brought him to submission.

"I beg pardon, my lady, I—I—"

"Now go!" I said, pointing to the door.

His parting look told me I had made at least one enemy that day.

As soon as I saw Mrs. Harding, I acquainted her with what I had done, but without mentioning his muttered words, which I would not condescend to remark upon.

She looked very much astonished, and rather doubtful.

"Why, the Johnsons have been gamekeepers at Avondell for more than a century," she said.

"If they had been so for a dozen centuries I would not keep that man another day," I replied.

"Ah! now you do indeed look an Avondell!" exclaimed Mrs. Harding, admiringly.

When the doctor came, he confirmed the old lady's report upon the wounded man, who was, however, inclined to be feverish, he said, and must be left at perfect rest.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE WOODS.

OF all the days of my life the fortnight which followed the eventful morning I have just described is the most indistinct in my memory. I cannot believe I was a free agent. Absurd as it may sound, I still firmly believe I was under the influence of some occult power, which it is impossible for me to define or understand.

That I, an impressionable, romantic girl of eighteen, should fall in love with a handsome young man, of refined manners and poetic temperament, was not at all astonishing; indeed, it was the most natural thing in the world, even though I was the Lady of Avondell, and he a poor artist of unknown parents. Such things have been common since the world began, and will continue to be so while the world lasts. But it seems to me there was a kind of glamour in the whole thing. Perhaps this idea has come of later events; but so it is, and I cannot shake it off.

Within a week, his wound was well enough for him to leave his chamber. As his hurt had been inflicted by one of my servants, and, as I shuddered to think, might have proved fatal, I felt myself responsible for it, and was most eager to testify this feeling in every possible way; and when he was able to come downstairs, I talked with him, read to him, played

to him, sung to him, showed him my own humble attempts at drawing, listened gratefully to his criticisms and instructions; in fine, did everything I could to while away the tedium of convalescence, while, for my part, I was never weary of listening to the delicious music of his voice.

Had there been any one possessed of the most ordinary worldly experience near me, they must have perceived the danger of such an intercourse; but there was only Mrs. Harding, who would not have thought it possible for any person with one drop of the Avondell blood in their veins to demean themselves by what she would have considered an unworthy passion.

Although I did not trouble to investigate the cause at the time, I think it was highly significant that, although I wrote two or three letters to my uncle I never once mentioned the presence of Adrien Sylvester at Avondell.

For a few days after he left his chamber, he had to content himself with first inhaling the fresh air from the window, then with taking a few turns up and down the terrace; but one evening he felt quite strong enough, he said, to walk through the woods. Not thinking of what I was doing, I offered to be his companion.

It had been an oppressively hot day; but toward seven o'clock a light breeze sprung up, and it was then that we strolled out into the open.

"I have not felt so well and strong since my accident as I do this evening," he said.

"I am very glad to hear you say so?" I replied.

"The satisfaction is damped for me by the thought that I must now bid adieu to this lovely place, and to the happiest days of my life."

"Indeed, Mr. Sylvester," I said, earnestly, "you are welcome to remain here as long as it pleases you. I shall be delighted—I mean, it is my duty, after all that—"

Here I became confused between the idea of being too warm and then too cold.

"You are very kind, but I could not trespass too long upon your hospitality, which I never shall forget to the latest moment of my life," he answered, mournfully.

How my heart sunk at the thought of his going away! "How I shall miss him!" was my inward ejaculation.

We walked on in silence for some minutes.

"My life has not been a very happy one," he resumed, presently. "I never knew my parents, nor who they were. I was reared on charity. One night, a poor French artist, Adrien Sylvester, while crossing the Pont Neuf, in Paris, saw a woman leaning over the

parapet. Believing, from her manner, she was about to jump into the river, he ran to her, just in time to draw her back, and snatch a bundle from her arms, which she had evidently intended to drop into the water. With a wild cry, she fled, was lost in the darkness, and seen no more. When he opened the bundle, he was astonished to find it contained an infant only a few weeks old. At first, he thought of sending it to the Foundling; but he was a bachelor, who led a quiet, sedentary life. He was fond of children, and determined to adopt me. He gave me a respectable education, and brought me up to his own profession. When I was about ten years old he came over to England. Five years afterward my dear benefactor died, and since then I have been alone in the world, fighting the battle of life, and a tolerable hard one it has been. But I am still young, and there is plenty of time to gain the victory yet."

He had begun to speak in a tone of deep sadness; but when he spoke of the future, raised his head, and his lips and nostrils quivered with energy and pride.

I thought I had never seen so handsome a face before.

"If talent will win it, I am sure you will!" I cried, enthusiastically; "for you paint very beautifully. That is to say, I am no judge, but—"

"Do not spoil the most precious flattery I have ever received from human lips," he broke in, earnestly. "Your sympathies and noble heart have, I know, overwhelmed your judgment; but those words will be such a pleasant memory to me in my hours of toil and loneliness."

I could have cried at my own maladroitness. This was the second time I had spoiled a real outburst of feeling by some cold words that seemed to rise to my lips without my volition.

I instinctively understood his motive in making what, to a proud man, as I was sure he was, must have been the humiliating confession of his doubtful birth. It was that he wished me to know him truly, without false impressions.

And I, on my part, felt embarrassed that he should regard me as a being so infinitely superior to himself, when I owed my grand position only to chance. Except that there was no mystery about my parents, my position in life a few months back had not been so greatly above his own. I felt that it was due to his generous confession to make him a similar one.

"Your story somewhat resembles mine," I began, a little eagerly. He stared at me, so that I could not help smiling, as I continued, "Indeed, it does. I was not born to all this

grandeur. I have not even a right to the name of Avondell, except so far as the law has given me the right to adopt it. I belong to a distant branch of the family. I lost my father, who was an officer in the army, when I was ten years old; my mother, when I was fifteen. They left no provision behind, and a bachelor uncle took me into his home out of *charity*."

I felt a pleasure in using that word as he had used it.

"About six months ago Sir Geoffrey Avondell died childless, and I received the astounding intelligence that no heir stood between me and the Avondell estate; that I was the head of the ancient house. I had often heard my mother talk of its grandeur, and of her cousin Geoffrey; but never heard there was any communication between them. We were far too humble people to be noticed by such a grandee, I suppose. I haven't lived here a month yet. My uncle wanted me to wait until his business would allow him to take a holiday, and come down with me; but I was burning to see the grand old ancestral mansion, and was too impatient to delay my visit; but I expect him down now in a few days. I shall be so glad when he comes, for it will be very lonely when you are gone."

Again I felt my tongue was running away with me, and again could feel the color mounting to my face.

This time he stepped in to relieve my embarrassment.

"You will have plenty of visitors, no doubt."

"I suppose so, when the London season is over; nearly every one is away now. I have received a few calls of congratulation from the neighboring gentry—very stiff people, that I did not at all like. So, you see, I am not such a very great lady, after all, and there is not such a wonderful distance between us."

I spoke in a half-jesting tone the thought that was uppermost in my mind. I desired to put him at his ease—to divest his mind of that inflated idea of my superiority, which, I felt, must be humiliating to him. If I had been asked why I was so anxious to put him upon an equality with myself, I should have protested it was only out of good-nature, and that I should have said precisely the same things to any other person in the same situation.

But as, in speaking the last word, I raised my eyes to his, and caught their passionate, yearning glance, a sudden revelation came to me, overwhelming me with shame and confusion.

"I . . . we had better return," I said, quickly; "the wind is chilly."

Hurriedly leading the way among the sinuous windings of the wood, we came at length

into the path, and nearly opposite the spot where I had seen the gray woman.

The sun was fast sinking, and its crimson rays, glinting through the leafy branches, fell upon the rugged bark and twisted roots of the oak tree; and there, standing close beside it, just in the ruddy beams, was the woman herself.

Her face was turned away from us, and she did not seem to perceive our coming.

I stopped and turned to my companion, who was a few paces behind me.

"Look there!" I said.

"At what?" he asked.

In that instant the figure had disappeared.

"Did you see a woman standing against that tree?"

"No," he replied; "but I was not looking in that direction."

Was it fancy—a mere hallucination? If so, it was marvelously distinct.

He asked what I had seen.

And, glad to find some indifferent topic of conversation to relieve the embarrassing silence which had fallen upon both since my last blundering speech, I related my adventure.

"Some poor, half-mad creature, who is wandering about the country, I suppose," he said. "It would be a charity to do something for her—to place her under proper restraint, if necessary."

"I will speak to the steward about her," I said, eagerly, "and if any thing can be done, it shall be. Poor creature! perhaps she is wandering, homeless and starving, about these lands, while I have more money than I know what to do with, and more luxuries than are good for any one. It is very wicked of me not to think of these things!"

"You are a noble-hearted creature, Miss Avondell!" exclaimed Adrien, warmly. "I would that all the rich and great thought like you; there would be far less misery in the world!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

UPON returning to the house, I went upstairs to my room, for I wished to be alone; and, sitting down at the open window, watched the crimson glow of the sunset fade into the purple grayness of twilight, lost in a reverie, in which many images, shadowy and indistinct, floated in a hazy, dreamy fashion.

Presently there was a knock at the door.

Vexed at the interruption, I bade the intruder, in rather a sharp tone, "Come in!"

It was Mrs. Harding.

"I hope I am not intruding, my lady?" she said, hesitating a little.

"Oh, no; not at all. What is it?" I inquired.

"Well, I did want to say a few words, if—"

"Come and sit down, then, Mrs. Harding. Nothing the matter, I hope?"

"Oh, no, my lady; nothing the matter. It was only something that came into my head just now I wanted to speak to you upon; but I hope you will not think it a liberty upon my part. You are a very young lady, and I am an old woman, and—"

"Speak out, Mrs. Harding. I am sure you will not offend me, whatever you say," I interrupted, with a guess at what was coming.

"Well, then, it is about that young man. Do you think it is quite right for a lady in your position to be quite so familiar—or, I should say, condescending—to a person like him? I am sure you have never thought about it."

"This time twelvemonth I should have regarded Mr. Sylvester as quite my equal," I replied, quietly. "He belongs to a glorious profession, and is decidedly a gentleman."

Mrs. Harding was that intensest of all aristocrats, an old servant, and she looked at me as though I had uttered the most dreadful blasphemy. To talk about any person who had not a family tree and a rent-roll being a gentleman, was, to her, Communism, Red Republicanism, Socialism, and every other ism combined. I am sure that in that moment I sunk fathoms in her estimation.

"But, my lady," she cried, "if your uncle were to hear—"

"What is there for him to hear? A gentleman meets with an accident close to my door; he is brought apparently lifeless into the house; I give him a shelter, and while he is here treat him as an equal. Surely, not one of my ancestors would have done less?—or the one that would, I should not care to acknowledge."

I spoke very warmly, for I felt greatly annoyed, more by her manner, more by what she left unsaid, than what she spoke.

"I am sure, my lady, I did not mean any offense!" she stammered.

"No, no; I am aware of that," I said, her mortified looks making me sorry for having spoken so sharply. "Mr. Sylvester is going away, so it is not worth while to say anything more about the matter."

I saw her face brighten at this announcement. And without further remark, she changed the conversation to some question of domestic affairs, and then retired.

This interruption changed my mood from one of dreamy reverie to restless excitability. Strange questions began to rise up in my mind—questions to which I dared not seek the answer even in self-confidence. The atmosphere of my chamber became hot and oppressive.

Leaning upon my window-sill, I looked out upon the night.

The full moon was just rising in the cloudless, starless sky; all looked so calm and cool, and delightful without, so dingy and gloomy within, that I left my room, descended the stairs, and passing through the hall, stood upon the steps for some minutes.

One of the Avondells, of Queen Anne's time, had raised a terraced garden along the front of the house, in imitation of the French style, and adorned it with a fountain, and statues, and huge vases. But the last owner of the estate had suffered these things to fall into decay; the fountain was dry, the figures not quite so perfect as the gods and goddesses they represented are supposed to be; and the urns and vases were cracked and lichen-stained, which imparted rather a melancholy aspect to the terrace.

Walking a few paces from the door, I leaned over the stone balustrade, and gazed absently into the darkness of the leafy depths that stretched before me. There was not a sound to be heard, save the rustle of a fitful breeze now and then among the foliage. Gradually, as the moon rose higher and higher, a soft, fleecy light was suffused over the whole scene, save where the woods cast their black shadows.

Suddenly I heard footsteps coming from the direction of the house. I turned, and saw the figure of a man advancing toward me.

How my heart leaped!—what a strange trembling came over me! Had there been time, I would have fled.

"I have been seeking you, Miss Avondell," said a silvery voice, "to say good-by. I found a letter waiting for me when I got back from our walk. It is from a friend, telling me to return to London at once. Some mysterious personage has been seeking me; refuses to tell his business; but says it is most important, and admits of no delay. An order for a picture, perhaps, that is to make my fortune. I shall be gone before you have left your room in the morning."

He spoke hurriedly, with an air of lightness that I could feel was only assumed.

"Perhaps it is some one—some relative who has succeeded in tracing you," I observed, always ready for a romantic solution.

"Then he must be supernaturally clever," he replied, with a forced laugh. "There is no fear that any one will ever trace me in that way, or desire to do so."

"Stranger things than that have happened to pass."

"I hope that may never come," I said, "I am afraid that any discoveries up to the point would be far from satisfactory," I replied, gloomily.

He was leaning against the balustrade close beside me, with eyes fixed upon the ground.

"I shall always think of the few days I

have passed beneath this roof as the happiest of my whole life," he said, looking up after a pause. "It will be a memory sad as sweet, since the reality can never return."

"You have no reason to take such a gloomy view of the future," I answered. "You are young, have talent, and are certain to rise in your profession; and who holds a prouder position in society than the successful artist?"

"But it is only a hollow one," he responded, bitterly. "Would one of the grantees, merchant, or squire, or noble, who is so delighted to welcome him to his drawing-room, to show him with his pictures and old china, and other curiosities, give him a daughter in marriage? Such a proposal would be received with indignation and scorn. *That* is the only test of a man's social position. Dukes marry brewers' and distillers' and bankers' daughters, even although the fathers may have begun life as errand-boys; but who ever heard of an aristocrat or a plutocrat giving his daughter to a man solely in consideration of his genius? No; not though he were a Shakspeare or a Michael Angelo!"

"But woman's love is not mercenary," I answered, warmly. "History and romance teem with proofs that love levels all ranks. No true woman ever loved a man for the accidental advantages of fortune, but because he was good or noble, or brave or clever."

"But women are seldom their own masters; the artificial restraints of society hem them in so closely that they are powerless to act as their hearts dictate."

"Then they are cowards."

Catching one of my hands in both of his, he said, in a low voice that trembled with emotion, "And you, Miss Avondell, could you be one of those true, those noble women who could scorn the conventionalities of society?"

Oh, how overwhelmed with shame and confusion I felt at that moment? What had my words been but a most unmaidenly invitation to such a declaration?

I snatched away my hand, and drawing back, exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. Sylvester, do not misunderstand me! I speak so foolishly, so recklessly, at times!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Avondell," he said, with a mortification as deep as my own. "I, too, was carried away. Let me beg of you not to think of it any more. I forgot myself. I shall never offend again. Farewell, and Heaven bless you!"

He was crying away, but I could not let him go. That, to evermore think of me as a mental coquette, or an empty-headed, romantic girl, who had lured him to an indiscreet trial, and then scornfully repulsed him, was a thing better than that!

"Stay, Mr. Sylvester," I said; "there is no

presumption. It was not any such thought that made me shrink from you, but a fear that you would misconstrue my words."

"I did misconstrue them," he answered, coldly, "and I am rightly punished for my presumption. Oh, Miss Avondell," he burst forth, "what can you think of me? How you must despise me—a poor, nameless, unknown waif, who might have died but for your generous hospitality! And how have I requited it? By insult, by— Surely I must have been mad!"

In his agitation, he had clasped his face in his hands, as though to shut out the picture his imagination had conjured up.

I laid one of mine gently upon his arm. I felt him thrill beneath my touch. He uncovered his eyes, and gazed down upon my upturned, tear-stained face, upon which the moonlight fell full.

Something he read there that produced in him a strange revulsion of feeling, for the next moment my head was pressed close against his breast.

"Can this be possible," he murmured, "or am I in a dream?"

I made no response, for I was still half-ashamed of the part I had played.

There was silence for a moment, then came an interruption which made us both start.

It was a low, grating, mocking laugh.

We turned simultaneously in the direction whence it came, and there, standing against the silent fountain, in the pale moonlight, was the woman in gray.

"It is a pity to disturb a pair of silly fools in their paradise," she said, mockingly. "Like Adam and Eve, the dark angel will soon drive you forth. And so an Avondell woman stoops from her high sphere to love a nameless man! That is reversing the old story. But the end will be the same—the end will be the same! You can't alter that!"

"Is this the woman you spoke of, darling?" he whispered to me.

"Yes; let us go and call the servants."

Low as I spoke, she caught the words.

"Call your servants!" she cried, with the same mocking laugh.

"Is there any thing can be done for you?" said Adrien, kindly. "Miss Avondell wishes to be your friend—to rescue you from your present miserable life. Come to the house now, and—"

"Enter that house," she answered, with a shudder, "to be shut up in some dungeon or lone room, and left to perish of hunger? Ah! you would like that, wouldn't you?" she burst forth, wildly; "to be never troubled by me any more—never to be haunted by my avenging shadow, so that you might sleep in peace, without any thought of the future? Genera-

tions ago a curse was launched upon that roof. Many an Avondell has lived and died since then, and it has never touched them; but its fulfillment is fast approaching. *'The name of Avondell shall pass to the stranger, and be borne by the outcast, whom no man will own; then shall the pride of your race be struck down into the dust, and your house be leveled to the earth!'*"

As she half-chanted the last sentence, with her bony arm extended and shaking menacingly, I shrunk close to Adrien, appalled, for in those words I recognized the burden of the curse.

Then again she burst into a wild laugh, and darted toward the flight of steps leading to the terrace.

As she reached the top, she turned again, and, in a tone of savage hatred, added, "And I will be ever near you till it has come to pass!"

The next moment she vanished into the darkness beneath.

CHAPTER V.

BAD NEWS OR GOOD?

SINCE I had been at Avondell, I had accustomed myself to rise very early; but a restless night, after a day of strange agitation, made me drowsy the next morning, and I awoke quite two hours beyond my usual time, to find my maid at my bedside with a letter in her hand.

"Mr. Sylvester told me to give you this, my lady," she said.

Ere I broke open the envelope, I could feel my face flush crimson, and then grow pale.

"You can leave me for ten minutes," I said.

I could never suppress the outward signs of emotion, and did not wish to have a witness near while I read the letter. It was fortunate I took this precaution.

It ran thus:

"AVONDELL, 4 A. M.

"MY DEAR MISS AVONDELL:—

"I feel I have acted like a villain, a scoundrel, in leading one so young and susceptible into such a declaration as passed between us last night; such would be the verdict of every honest man and woman, and such will be your own opinion, I am sure, when you are calm enough to consider. What could be more base than the way in which I have acted? Great Heaven! I shrink with horror from myself when I think of it—that I, an outcast, owned by no man, should dare aspire—but it is past! You will soon become ashamed of your moment of weakness. All I ask of you is not to think too hardly of me. You will ever be to me a hallowed memory—my first and only love! Farewell! ADRIEN."

I sunk back upon my pillow, overwhelmed by the conflicting emotions which this epistle called forth.

He was gone—forever; and it seemed as if

all the joy had departed out of my life—as if I had suddenly been cast upon a barren, illimitable moor, over which I was doomed to wander until death. Then came a glow of hot, bright sunlight. How nobly he had acted—what a noble nature he had displayed! What woman, if she had not loved him before, would not love him for such self-sacrifice as this?

I kissed the letter—bedewed it with my tears—and vowed I would remain true and faithful to him through all time, and that if he were not my husband, no man should be.

Suddenly the clouds rolled over me darker than before, for my eyes had fallen upon the phrase, "*I, an outcast, owned by no man!*" What strange fatality made him quote the words of the curse? Yet that might have been but the unconscious echo of the woman's words, that seemed so appropriate to him.

Terribly appropriate! The fatal malediction seemed hurrying onward with giant steps toward its fulfillment!

In my person, the name of Avondell had passed to the stranger; and it was so willed by the late Sir Geoffry that my husband should take the family name; and if Adrien were to become so, would not he?

What was the house of Avondell to me? I was not born to its state and grandeur—they oppressed me. Why, then, should I sacrifice my own happiness and that of another to its upholding? Let it perish!

Here my meditations were interrupted by the entrance of my maid.

I was about to ask her, with some irritation, why she did not wait until I rung, when she directed my thoughts into an entirely new channel by announcing that Mr. Etheridge, my uncle and guardian, had just arrived.

I dressed as quickly as I could, and descended to the breakfast-room, where I was told he awaited me.

Mr. Etheridge was a man about fifty years of age, a wine merchant in the city, and, as I have before intimated, became on the death of my parents, my only friend. He was a widower, and childless, and I had conceived a great affection for him, which I am sure he reciprocated.

To my surprise there was no smile upon his lip, and his countenance wore an expression of gravity such as I had never before witnessed upon it.

"What is the matter?" I inquired, anxiously.

"We must breakfast before I can talk," he answered. "I left London by the mail last night, and feel rather sharp-set."

But although he made a great pretense of eating and enjoying his meal, I could perceive he had no real appetite.

At length, unable to keep up the farce any longer, he pushed aside his plate, and, rising, said, "Let us take a turn in the garden."

In a few minutes we were upon the terrace.

I saw him glance round upon the grand old house, and upon the woodland landscape bathed in the golden light of the morning sun; then he uttered a deep sigh.

"What a lovely spot it is!" he exclaimed.

I could make no reply; I was too anxiously watching him, and wondering what could have made him so sad, so different from his usual self.

"Mabel, my child," he said, taking one of my hands and placing it within his own, "I have bad news for you—very bad news. It is very early for you to experience the disappointments of life, and the instability of all earthly possessions; but I think you have fortitude, young as you are, to bear up against it."

I saw him turn away his head to brush a tear from his cheek.

What could it mean? A thousand suggestions were rushing through my mind, but no suspicion of the truth—as how could it?

"Suppose," he continued, after a short pause—"suppose, now, that all this was a dream, and that you were to awake in your little chamber at Canonbury, and find you had never been, except in imagination, the Lady of Avondell; never been the possessor of this grand old mansion, these broad acres; never been a rich heiress at all, but simple Mabel Etheridge;—would the awakening be so *very* dreadful?"

"Do you mean to say that I am not Sir Geoffrey's heiress?" I inquired.

"I fear it will be brought in so," he answered.

I, too, then glanced around, and took in the *coup d'œil* of all I had lost.

Was there a living heart that would not have felt a pang at such a contemplation—at the thought that a few moments before I had believed myself the mistress of all that lovely landscape, of all the wealth and power it suggested, and now it had passed away from me? It was the sharpest pang I had ever felt.

But there is no evil without an attendant good, and my heart leaped high again as I thought, "Now, the barrier between me and Adrien is broken down, and the shadow of the curse no longer rests upon me."

I could feel my uncle's kind but keen eyes fixed upon me while these reflections, in less time than it will take to peruse them, darted through my mind.

"We always feel a little disappointed after awaking from such dreams," I replied; "but the disappointment soon passes away. What is the use to cry for shadows?"

I spoke almost cheerfully.

"My brave girl!" he said, kissing my forehead; and a hot tear followed the pressure of his lips.

I could not help feeling a little awkward, for I was not so deserving of his exalted opinion as he thought I was.

Had there been no love and no superstition in my mind, should I have acted so heroically? I fear not.

"Tell me all about it," I said, anxious to turn his attention from what I regarded as my hypocritical pose.

We sat down upon a rustic seat under the shadow of a tree, and he told me the story.

Sir Geoffrey Avondell, the last of the direct line, had, it had been supposed, lived and died a bachelor. He had resided the greater part of his life abroad, and was a man of gloomy and misanthropic habits.

It would appear, however, that in his youth there were stories in circulation that greatly invalidated the bachelor theory; but as years rolled on, these stories came to be regarded as false, and were remembered only by a few, and even those few put no credence in them.

Moving in quite a different sphere, and never holding any communication with the Avondells, it was no wonder that my parents were quite ignorant of such gossip, and that no breath of it ever penetrated to any of my surroundings.

The true story of Geoffrey Avondell was this: When about thirty years of age, after leading a by no means decorous life, he fell in love with a very beautiful woman of humble birth.

He used every art to win her unlawfully, but finding at length that she was inflexible to every allurements save marriage, his affection went so far as to comply with this condition.

They were united privately, and directly afterward went abroad.

He soon afterward became dissatisfied with his wife's conduct; grew jealous of some friend; and when a child was born, declared it was not his.

Upon this his wife fled from him, taking the infant with her, and was heard of no more.

Mingled with his real or affected jealousy, he had another motive in driving the unfortunate woman from him; for, from the stories I afterward heard of his insults and cruelty to her, there is no doubt that it was the result of a deliberate plan. That motive proceeded from a dread lest he should be the instrument in bringing ruin and disgrace upon his house, and so cause the fulfillment of the family curse in his person.

It appeared that I had not been installed in what all considered my right many weeks when a young man suddenly came forward,

and claimed to be the son of Sir Geoffrey. Upon leaving her husband's roof, Lady Avondell had, according to his showing, wandered from city to city in Europe, earning her living in various ways, now as a lady's-maid, now as an itinerant singer—she had a very fine voice; now as a hawker, now as a fortune-teller; and he had been the companion of her wanderings; but until she lay upon her death-bed she never revealed to him the name of his father. Strange to say, the date upon which she expired was just seven days later than that on which her cruel husband breathed his last.

She committed certain important documents to his hands, including her marriage certificate, that of his baptism, a miniature of Sir Geoffrey, etc. Armed with these, he repaired to London, and put his case in the hands of a sharp attorney, who very soon, by the help of advertisements, ferreted out very much more important evidence in the form of witnesses, including Sir Geoffrey's confidential valet.

My uncle had early received information that there was another claimant in the field; but, regarding it only as an imposture, had not mentioned the circumstance to me, and, strange as it may sound, nothing of the matter had been heard at Avondell.

But, omitting all further tedious explanation, suffice it to say the proofs in favor of the young man being the rightful heir were overwhelming.

"We can throw the estate into Chancery," said my uncle, in conclusion, "and sift the proofs in open court; but neither your lawyer nor mine believe we should have a leg to stand upon—not even upon the will, which, as the title and estates are strictly entailed, is no better than waste paper."

"Oh, no, no," I said; "if he be the rightful heir, I would not, if I could, contest his claim for one moment. I am ready to quit Avondell this very hour."

"We need not be quite so precipitate as that. I will write at once to the lawyers, and make known your determination. I never for a moment doubted what it would be; and before we finally renounce our grandeur, I should like two or three days at least out of the holiday I fondly promised myself among your ancestral woods."

Then he added, in a more serious tone, "Never mind, Mabel, my girl. Thank Heaven, you have a comfortable home, and one loving heart, at least, to return to. By-and-by we shall laugh over this little adventure, and regard it as quite a little bit of delightful romance woven into the sober prose of our life."

Before luncheon time it began to be bruited in the servants' hall that something was wrong. Of course, we lost no time in acquaint-

ing the good old housekeeper with what had happened.

Her grief and consternation went beyond all bounds.

"The fellow's an impostor!" she cried. "I've heard about that woman, but she never came beneath this roof; and I am quite sure that such a grand man as Sir Geoffrey would never have married such a creature."

But such a prejudiced opinion from one who really knew nothing about the matter, and her vehement advice to go to law, could have no effect upon our fixed determination.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIGHTFUL HEIR.

I DARE say the good old soul was greatly surprised to see how cheerfully both myself and my uncle took our fall; and in her eyes there could not have been a worse fall than to lose the Avondell title and estates.

We passed the day picnicking in the woods, and rambling for miles about the country, and were almost as light-hearted as though that sort of thing were to go on indefinitely.

"Well, at all events, you have got a good holiday out of it, Mabel, and I a breath of fresh air that will sweep away the cobwebs; and we'll go to Scarborough, or the lakes, or somewhere after this, before we settle down in our old obscurity."

As we were crossing a field on our way home to dinner, on the third day, we came upon a man lying down under a hedge, in whose sullen features I recognized the gamekeeper I had discharged.

He rose at our approach, and, putting his finger to his hat, saluted me with "Good afternoon, *my lady!*" There was an evil grin upon his lips, and an irony in his tone, that fully conveyed his meaning.

I was glad to find that my uncle, who was talking at the time, did not remark either. Had he done so, it might have led to an explanation into which I did not wish to enter for the present; for Adrien's name had not been mentioned.

As we approached the house, we found Mrs. Harding on the watch for us. She was looking very pale and disturbed.

"He's come!" she said, in a choking voice.

"Who?" demanded my uncle.

"The fellow—the impostor! I won't stop in the house! I'll leave to-morrow morning! I'll never demean myself to call a tramp a Gipsy master."

"Hush, hush, Mrs. Harding!" said my uncle. Then he added, half to himself, "He might have had the decency to apprise me of his coming, or to have waited a few days. Where is he?"

"He and another man, who looks like a lawyer, are in the oak parlor, sir."

I felt very nervous and embarrassed at the approaching meeting. It could not possibly be a pleasant one.

My uncle wished to see him first; but to this I objected.

"I would rather get it over as quickly as possible," I said, "and should not like him to suppose that I shrunk from the meeting."

"That's my brave girl again!" he said, approvingly.

We sent a footman to say that we were ready to receive Sir Geoffrey Avondell and his friend in the drawing-room.

"While we are here we will keep up our state, eh, Mabel?" he said, smiling.

Very soon afterward our messenger came back; and, throwing open the door, announced Sir Geoffrey Avondell and Mr. Lovett.

The next moment there entered the room a tall, very dark young man, dressed in quiet good taste. He was decidedly handsome; but it was a bold, keen face, with the hard, wily look of a man of the world. An assumption of refinement and gentlemanly ease sat but ill upon him; and, with all his care, the underbred man would break through the thin veneer occasionally.

I suppose it was but natural that I should be prepossessed against him; and my first impression did nothing to weaken that feeling.

But the ill-concealed look of admiration with which he regarded me told me, without any vanity, that I had been fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to create quite a different kind of feeling in him.

"I am very sorry," he said, extending his hand to me, and bowing over it, "to be so ominous and disagreeable a visitor to my fair cousin. I can assure you it quite damps the pleasure of my good fortune. But,"—and here the ill-breeding began to peep out,—"of course I could not be expected to relinquish my rights."

"As they are your rights, Sir Geoffrey, what need is there for apologies which must be equally embarrassing to both parties?" interrupted my uncle, haughtily.

"Quite right, Mr. Etheridge. I hate ceremony, and am a firm believer in the old proverb, 'The least said, the soonest mended.' Besides, the matter may not be as bad as it seems. We may be able to effect a compromise agreeable to both parties."

Here a cough attracted my attention to the second visitor, Mr. Lovett, the solicitor, a spare, elderly, precise-looking man, a very model of legal respectability, who had not, as yet, uttered a word.

There was a familiarity, mingled with a condescending air of superiority, in Sir Geoffrey's

manner that was any thing but agreeable to me, and it quite annoyed my uncle.

"Miss Etheridge desires no compromise," he replied, even more freezingly than before.

"The moment she heard that there were satisfactory proofs of your being the rightful heir, she fully admitted them, and resigned all claims. To-morrow morning we shall depart for London. Had we known you had been in such haste to take possession, we would have left before."

"Well, I suppose," he said, taking the hint, "it would have been the correct thing to have dropped a line; but I thought it would be more friendly to come down upon you unawares, and without ceremony. As to your leaving to-morrow, I could not hear of such a thing. You must not hurry away on my account. I shall be delighted with your company as long as you like to remain."

Here Mr. Lovett, who could perceive that his client was heaping coals of fire upon my uncle's head, interposed.

"It is very good-natured of you, Sir Geoffrey, to propose this; but such a stay would scarcely be agreeable to the lady under the circumstances."

I took quite a liking to the good lawyer for this touch of delicacy.

"Oh, well, we shall see about that," responded Sir Geoffrey.

At that moment dinner was announced, and he offered me his arm, which I could not refuse.

At table he was almost embarrassingly polite and attentive. He had a flow of conversation, and could talk even cleverly upon such subjects as could be mastered by observation only. Books he did not touch upon. Although his manner did not please me, I endeavored to talk on constantly, as a man of his caliber would have mistaken any stiffness upon my part for spleen, and that was an interpretation which I could not have endured.

So I did my best to be agreeable with him; and as I was determined not to remain another day at Avondell—a gentleman would never have thought of breathing such an invitation—I sought about in my mind how I could gloze over the refusal, and take from it all the appearance of wounded pride. What could be better than to ask him to do me a favor? That was a capital thought.

"Oh, Sir Geoffrey," I said, in a lull of the conversation, "there is a poor beggar-woman wandering about here—I think she is insane. I feel a strange interest in her. If you would see into the poor creature's case, and if any thing can be done for her, I should consider myself under a great obligation."

"I wish the subject of your petition had been a worthier one," he answered, with a

hard laugh. "I'm afraid, if your Quixotic propensities had been allowed full play, you would have found yourself terribly imposed upon. Never trouble yourself about this cunning vagabond, who is only playing a part—perhaps is connected with a gang of thieves, and reconnoitering the premises. You may depend upon it, I'll deal properly with her. Pray think of some other favor, Miss Etheridge."

I could feel my face was a burning scarlet. I was so mortified and indignant at this coarse refusal, and the terms in which it was couched, that, the meal being finished, I rose without a word.

"Oh, pray do not be offended, Miss Etheridge!" he said, in an altered tone; "I will do any thing you wish, even to giving my money to a begging impostor."

Here his speech was interrupted by an exclamation that at that moment burst from my lips.

The dining-room was a spacious apartment, with three deep oriel windows almost to the ground. It was not yet dark; indeed, the last rays of the setting sun were just fading, when my eyes happening to glance toward the center window, I saw a wild-looking face pressed close against the glass.

"There she is!" I cried, involuntarily.

Sir Geoffrey's eyes took the direction I pointed; he was raising a glass of wine to his lips, and so much did my exclamation seem to startle him, that it dropped from his fingers with a crash upon the oaken floor, and he clutched at the back of his chair.

My uncle and Mr. Lovett both rose from their seats, and every eye was turned upon the window. Each person distinctly saw the face; and, as it drew back, an arm was raised, and shaken menacingly. Then the apparition disappeared.

"Pursue that woman! Send the servants out in all directions to scour the woods," said my uncle to the footman, who was waiting.

"Stop where you are!" cried Sir Geoffrey, in a voice of thunder.

The man looked bewildered.

"I will go myself," said my uncle, darting out of the room.

I was following him, to seek my own room, when Sir Geoffrey ran after me, and laid a hand upon my arm.

"I beg ten thousand pardons for my abruptness," he said; "but you really so startled me I did not know what I said. I cannot think what makes me so nervous to-night."

He looked very pale, and his hand trembled.

"No apology is needed, Sir Geoffrey," I replied, coldly. "You are master here; it is my uncle who should apologize for forgetting that fact."

I am sure my features expressed the utmost contempt as I brushed past him and left the room.

I at once proceeded to pack my boxes, assisted by Mrs. Harding and my maid, the latter shedding tears all the time.

"I have written my notice, and given it to James to deliver," she said. "Oh, that ever I should have lived to see the name of Avondell degraded in such a person! Poor Lady Bridget's curse has fallen at last!"

My wardrobe and goods and chattels were not extensive, and an hour sufficed to get every thing ready for starting next morning.

We had just finished, when a knock came to the door. It was my uncle.

My two attendants having left the room, we were alone.

The mysterious woman had contrived to baffle his pursuit, as she had everybody else's.

Full of the subject, I began to express my indignation at the insult he had received.

"Well, I do not really think it was intentional," interposed my uncle. "No man could apologize more profusely than he has done since. You see, he is not precisely a gentleman; for which, perhaps, circumstances are more to blame than he is. I have no doubt he has had a hard battle to fight with fate, and such experiences make men skeptical toward their fellow-creatures. He thought your girlish romance and tender heart were being imposed upon. Of course a well-bred man would have humored you, even although he might have laughed in his sleeve, and sent your *protegee* to prison as a vagrant the next day."

I was very much amazed to hear him speak in this manner, and still more at the apologetic tone in which the words were uttered.

"He is very much charmed with you," he went on; "was quite enthusiastic, indeed; and expressed his regret at the awkward position he had placed you in in the most handsome manner."

Then he stopped again.

"Indeed," he added, after another pause, "I am the bearer of a very important communication from him to you."

"To me?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he replied. "He has actually made me a formal offer for your hand."

"For my hand!" I iterated. "And what reply did you make?"

"The reply I leave to you, my dear Mabel."

"Then my answer is no—a thousand times, no!" I answered, with an energy that quite startled him.

"My dear, you are much too hasty. But that is the way with you women; you take the most unreasonable dislikes for a single word, or what you choose to construe into a slight.

He really conscientiously believed you were being imposed upon; but I am sure he would give a hundred pounds to recall the unthinking words he spoke. He is not a polished gentleman, but he is a sharp, observant fellow, and will very soon pick up in good society the tone he lacks. He is good-looking, and very few girls would refuse him if he were even much less than a baronet. You know I am not a mercenary man, and shall make no attempt to coerce your inclinations; but I think it a very good match, and it would get over the awkwardness and mortification which you must feel, and will be made to feel still more by kind friends who were envious of your sudden elevation. Now, sleep upon it, and by the morning you will be more fitted to judge."

"No, uncle, it is impossible! I could never love him!" I answered, firmly.

"Not another word to-night. I will see you again in the morning. Good-night, dear!" And he kissed me and went away.

I cannot describe the state of agitation this offer threw me into.

"Oh!" I thought, "how those two ideas, fortune and position, can sway even the best of human hearts, as they have my uncle's!"

Even had my love not been already given, I could not have consented to become the wife of Sir Geoffrey Avondell; for I had, from the first moment my eyes fell upon him, conceived one of those unaccountable repulsions of which we have all had experience in our time.

My uncle was knocking at my door at six o'clock the next morning.

I was already up and dressed, so came out, and we walked down stairs onto the terrace, without exchanging a word beyond our ordinary greeting.

"Well," he said, when we had taken one turn down the center walk, "what is the result of sleeping upon it?"

"I have not changed my resolution in the least," I answered.

"Then you have decided to refuse him?"

"Positively!"

"I think it's a pity," he replied, with a look of disappointment. "But then you have only yourself to please, so we will say no more about it."

Very much relieved by that declaration, I threw my arms about his neck, and kissed him very gratefully.

"It would have made me miserable for life—I am sure it would!" I said.

"Then it is much better as it is; and, under these circumstances, we had better catch the first train to London."

"Oh, yes, yes—by all means; I am quite ready!" I replied, eagerly.

As soon as Sir Geoffrey was out of his

room, my uncle sought a private interview with him.

I afterward heard that he was greatly astonished and very much annoyed at my rejection of his offer.

"I am not in the habit of easily giving up any object I have once set my mind upon," he said; "and I certainly shall not prove false to myself in this case. Of course, the young lady is a little piqued at my unexpected appearance when she thought herself sole mistress; but that will wear off in time, and then she may think more kindly of me and the position she has refused. Will you permit me to make a call upon you in London?"

My uncle could not very well refuse this, even if he had been inclined to do so, which he was not, and so it was agreed.

But I was not told a word about it.

When we made our farewells, Sir Geoffrey's manner was coldly polite; mine, I am sure, was freezing.

Only for a moment did my eyes rest upon him, and that glance still further increased my prejudice, for his countenance wore anything but a pleasant expression.

"I wish you good-by, Sir Geoffrey," I said.

"I wish you *au revoir*, Miss Etheridge," he replied.

We entered the carriage that was to convey us to the station, I cast one lingering look upon the grand old mansion of which I had so recently been the mistress, and we were driven away.

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERY.

AND so, after being "my lady" for a few brief weeks, I quietly settled down in uncle's little suburban home again as Miss Etheridge.

All my friends were, of course, in a desperate state of grief at my downfall. Perhaps they meant it; perhaps they felt the opposite. It did not matter whether they did or not. And it was soon forgotten in some newer subject of interest.

Within a fortnight I had come to regard my late grandeur much in the light of a very vivid dream, or of an exciting romance, that had made a deeper impression upon me than usual.

But there was one person, one event, which no lapse of time could strip of reality.

Since I recorded his farewell note I have made no direct mention of Adrien; yet he was never out of my mind.

Had I known where to address, I should have sent him a line, to tell him of my change of fortune; but then, I thought, the story having got into the newspapers, he would, most probably, see it or hear about it. In our conversations at Avondell I had mentioned

Canonbury as being the locality of my uncle's residence. A "Directory" would soon supply him with the name of the thoroughfare and the number of the house, and I daily expected to hear some news of him.

This expectation, however, was not unmingled with anxiety. My uncle was a proud man, and what would he say to my rejecting a baronet for a poor, unknown artist, who owed even his name to the charity of a stranger?

As I have before observed, he was the most kind and indulgent of friends; but how would he be able to understand this suddenly-conceived love for one whom I had known but a few days? Could I understand it, or explain it even to myself? But who could ever understand the glamour of love?—why a heart should go forth to one among the crowd, who is neither better, cleverer, nor handsomer than many others—at least, in the common eye—whom we meet with indifference? Such sympathies are among the greatest mysteries of our being. Yet, unless the case be our own, most of us, both young and old, regard such a passion as mine as a mere fancy, that ought to be very peremptorily dealt with.

The days, and then the weeks, passed on, and still no sign came to me from him. Once or twice I found myself in the neighborhood of Tottenham Court Road. I made some excuse to myself for being there, but my real object was the hope of meeting him. I was doomed to disappointment.

Before leaving Avondell my uncle had proposed that we should have a month or six weeks at the seaside or the lakes; but on returning to town I heard no more about it, and, as I had had my holiday, it was not my place to mention it. I could not help remarking that day by day he lost more and more of his old cheerfulness; that he had long fits of gloomy reverie. Was I the cause?—was he annoyed with me for having refused Sir Geoffrey? I could not help thinking so, and the thought began to fret me. Alas! I was soon to be undeceived, and to learn that his dejection resulted from a far more serious matter.

Just one month after our arrival in London, as I was sitting at work one morning, the servant entered to announce that Mrs. Harding desired to see me.

"Show her in," I exclaimed, with more animation than I had displayed for many a day.

And the next moment I had both the dear, faithful old creature's hands clasped in mine, and was kissing her honest face; while she, quite overcome, began to sob like a child, and threw her arms round the neck of her "dear lady," as she still persisted to call me, and hugged me as though I had been her own daughter.

Then I took off her bonnet and shawl, and leading her to a couch, sat her down beside me. She was associated with my memories of *him*, and it seemed to me as though something of that time was brought back to me with her presence.

Then I asked her the news of Avondell.

She had carried out her threat, and left the old house.

"If I had not done so of my own accord," she said, "I believe he would have sent me away; all the servants are under notice. But he has taken on Ralph Johnson again, that you discharged, and Ralph seems high in favor with his master."

To my more direct inquiries, however, she was obliged to admit, although very reluctantly, that Sir Geoffrey's behavior was not open to any complaint upon the whole; that he treated everybody very well, and behaved himself in a very respectable manner.

"But he is not the kind of began to I have been accustomed to," she said, "he had really: 'he is not an Avondell! All his prophesy is only put on till he feels himself a little sure in his seat; then he'll show himself in his true colors, depend upon't!'"

Although I was prepossessed against him, I was of a different opinion. I believed that he would always endeavor to fulfill the obligations of his position to the best of his ability, but did not vex the old lady by saying so.

"I thought it would have been my death to leave the dear old place, that I had lived in from a child!" she said, the tears coursing fast down her wrinkled cheeks. "It was as if you uprooted one of the great trees in the woods, and carried it away to grow somewhere else. But I felt I couldn't serve that man—I couldn't demean myself to it! And now, don't you think, my lady," she added, with a sudden energy, "there's something in such a feeling?—that it's a sort of a warning? If he'd been a real Avondell, my heart would have gone out to him, if he'd been ever so bad. It must—it would have been but natural! After eating their bread for three generations, it would have come by instinct, as a mother turns to her child; but, instead of that, I took a dislike to him at once!"

"Perhaps that may be partly accounted for by your affection for me?" I suggested.

"That might have had something to do with it," she answered reflectively; "but I have a feeling apart even from that."

Such arguments could not fail to have some weight with me, who was always disposed to look upon the romantic side of anything.

But changing the conversation, I asked her what she was going to do now. She had taken a cottage about a mile from Avondell, and was going to live there with one of her nieces, who was a widow.

"I shall be able to see the old house, and the old familiar spots," she said, with a sigh; "and be buried in the old church with those who have gone before me."

She had come up to London for the sole purpose of seeing me, and I begged her to remain two or three weeks—an invitation with which she was delighted, but which she accepted with some scruples.

"By the by," I said, suddenly, "has anything more been seen or heard of that poor mad-woman?"

"Ah, my lady, that reminds me of something that happened a few days after you left. You know you gave orders through the steward that she should be taken whenever she was found, and brought to the house. Well, Sir Geoffrey countermanded this, and gave strict orders that she was not to be molested, or in any way interfered with, and from that time she has never been seen.

"But that is not what I was going to tell you, although it put me in mind of it. We had it very hot down at Avondell the first week after you went; and the butler, who is a very stout man, as you know, could not sleep at night, and used to sit at the open window of his bedroom, which overlooks the terrace. Well, one bright moonlight night—he said it was between twelve and one—looking toward the steps that lead up out of the grounds, he saw a man coming up them, carrying something over his shoulder. At first he thought it was a robber, and was just going to give an alarm, when, as the man paused at the top of the steps to half-rest his burden against the balustrade, and lifted his hat to wipe his forehead, standing full in the moonlight, he saw it was Ralph Johnson.

"Well, he thought this very strange, and wondering what he could be doing, watched his movements very closely. Presently he raised up his load again, and made toward the house. As he came nearer, Edwards got a better view of what he was carrying, and said he felt all of a shiver, as he thought it looked like a human body, covered over with a cloak, or something of the kind. Johnson made for the little door, you know, at the end of the terrace, which leads by a private staircase to the rooms usually occupied by the family, and which are used by Sir Geoffrey. Edwards had cautiously put his head out of window to watch. He saw him standing before the door, then heard a low whistle, and after a while the door seemed to be opened from the inside, and Johnson went in.

"Very much excited by what he had seen, Edwards continued his watch, and in about a quarter of an hour, saw the gamekeeper come out again, walk along the terrace, and disappear down the steps the way he had come. He

told me all about it the next morning, and asked my advice, as to whether he ought to mention what he had seen to Sir Geoffrey. 'My advice,' I said, 'is to keep it to yourself; don't mention it to anybody. Depend upon it, Sir Geoffrey knows all about it.'"

"But what do you make of it, Mrs. Harding?" he asked.

"I don't know what to make of it, Mr. Edwards," I said; and I do not. Wasn't it a strange thing, my lady?"

"Very, indeed," I answered, thoughtfully.

"I must tell you that Edwards has got his notice with the rest, as I should have done had I given the new baronet the chance."

Mrs. Harding did not seem to have the slightest idea of connecting this strange affair with the disappearance of the woman in gray. And why should I?

But the two events became inextricably associated in my mind.

When I came to recall Sir Geoffrey's peculiar manner from the moment he caught sight of that wild face pressed against the glass, I could not help thinking it was very strange.

He did not strike me as the kind of man who could be so startled by a woman's nervous exclamation as to drop a glass of wine from his hand, and turn pale as a ghost.

The tone of voice, too, in which he had ordered she should not be pursued, and the marked uneasiness with which he saw my uncle quit the dining-room, seemed far more than the occasion could possibly call for.

All kinds of strange and horrible solutions began to present themselves to my imagination; but I drove them away, very angry with myself.

"There is my old silly romance, running off with my common sense again," I thought.

So I abruptly changed the conversation, and soon afterward my uncle came in.

He received the good old housekeeper very cordially, and added his invitation to mine.

I thought he inquired with a very marked interest about Sir Geoffrey; and when she had unfolded her budget—of course she made no mention of the little mystery over which I had been recently puzzling—he heaved a sigh, and fell into one of his reveries.

"He is thinking of my refusal, and regretting it," I thought.

CHAPTER VIII.

COMING EVENTS.

Two days after Mrs. Harding's arrival, I received, early in the afternoon, a telegram from my uncle to put off the dinner to seven—we always dined at six—and provide something extra, as he was going to bring a gentleman home with him.

He returned at his usual time—half-past five—but alone.

"I thought some one was to dine with us?" I said.

"So there will be," he replied; "he is coming later."

"Any one I know?" I inquired, indifferently.

"Yes; but the last person in the world you would expect a visit from."

Struck by the peculiarity of his tone, I looked up at him. There was something in the expression of his face that gave me the clow.

"You do not mean—"

I faltered, and could not finish the sentence.

"It is Sir Geoffrey Avondell," he said, turning away his face.

His tone, his look, his movement would have told me why Sir Geoffrey was coming, and his next words confirmed my impression.

"Mabel, dear," he said, after a slight pause, and speaking very earnestly, "I wish you to make yourself as agreeable as possible to him, for a reason which I will explain by and by."

"Very well, uncle," I answered, as calmly as I could. But, oh, how my heart sunk within me!

When I told Mrs. Harding who our expected visitor was, she was rather surprised. Full of my trouble, I told her of his offer of marriage, which I had not mentioned before, and of my fear, amounting to certainty, that he was now coming to renew it.

I expected a burst of indignation; but, to my astonishment, she took the announcement very quietly.

"Well, my dear young lady, it would give you back your own again, and we should have a true Avondell at the old house," she said.

"Then you think that the man whom you are too proud to serve would make me a very fitting husband?" I answered, indignantly.

"I do not think him at all worthy of you, but it would give you back your rightful heritage, my lady," she replied.

"Money, name, position, those are the only things a woman has a right to marry for," I thought, bitterly. "Such is the doctrine of the world."

Sir Geoffrey arrived about half-past six. He was most profuse in his compliments to me, and I received them with as good a grace as I could assume.

I thought his manner had toned down a little since I saw him last. I could not help acknowledging that he was decidedly good-looking, and that he might easily have taken his pick from among girls of far greater pretensions in every respect than myself. Why, then, did he persist in addresses which he must perceive were disagreeable to me?

I endeavored to fulfill my uncle's desire,

and make myself agreeable to him; but I am certain my manner was constrained. This, however, he did not, or would not, perceive.

I could not help observing that my uncle seemed to be very far from being at his ease; that he drank more wine than usual, and that his spirits were forced.

"Oh, by the by! I have made every effort to discover your mysterious beggar-woman since you went away," said Sir Geoffrey, in the course of conversation, "but without success; she seemed to disappear with you. I suppose she thought she would not find my heart quite so tender as yours."

"She never had but one shilling of me," I answered. "I should not have done anything for her without thoroughly investigating her case."

"That I fully intended to do could I have found her," he answered, hastily. "And, had she proved deserving, *for your sake*, Miss Etheridge, I would have seen that she was provided for."

"Then you were not able to find her?" I remarked; and, by a sudden impulse, looked him very steadily in the face.

Did he flush, or was it only my fancy?

"No; nor even hear any tidings of her," he replied, and then abruptly changed the conversation.

At length, the evening was over, and our guest departed.

"I shall call upon you in the city to-morrow, Etheridge," he said; and I fancied there was something very significant in the tone in which the words were uttered.

When he was gone, my uncle lapsed into gloomy silence. I watched him for some minutes, until, unable to endure the anxious suspense that was torturing me any longer, I went over to him, knelt down beside his chair, and took his hand.

"Is anything the matter, uncle dear?" I inquired. "You seem so dull and low-spirited."

"I am," he answered; "I am trying to nerve myself for a very disagreeable business."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I faltered.

"Yes," he answered, placing his hand upon my head; "but I know not how to ask you."

"Surely you should not hesitate to ask of me anything; you, my best and only friend."

I spoke bravely, but my heart was beating wildly with the dread of what was coming.

"You know," he said, "there is a great commercial depression just now. I have never been a rich man, far from it, as I have never had sufficient capital to extend my transactions. A firm failed the other day which was largely indebted to us, our own

liabilities are very considerable, and unless I can raise ten thousand within a week, I must declare myself a bankrupt!"

This was a blow I had not anticipated.

"Oh, if I were only mistress of Avondell now!" I exclaimed. "I have never regretted my loss till this moment."

"You may be so again," he replied. "Sir Geoffrey has renewed his offer. By some means, too, he has heard of my embarrassment, and has generously offered to advance me the ten thousand pounds on the day you become his wife. But I've promised not to coerce your inclination, and would sooner let all go than do so. It must be of your own free will, or not at all!"

I never knew what agony could be concentrated into a moment of time until then. I did all I could to prevent my face betraying what I felt, but could feel my lips whiten and grow cold as I said, "I will accept Sir Geoffrey's offer."

"Of your own free will?" he said.

"Of my own free will," I repeated.

"That is a brave, good girl!" clasping me in his arms. "And I'm sure you'll never repent the resolution. If I thought such a marriage would lead to your unhappiness, you know I would not sanction it. But I cannot perceive any possible objection; there is no previous attachment in the way, I am sure, and the love that comes after marriage is worth all the romance that comes before. Lovers anticipate so much that the reality is always disappointment. Sir Geoffrey must be fond of you, or he would not have renewed his offer after the severe snubbing you gave him. He cannot have any ulterior motive in making you his wife, as you will bring him neither fortune nor additional position. Had he been mercenary or ambitious, he would have sought a wife in some poor but aristocratic family, and borrowed from her a luster to lighten his own shady antecedents. I'd stake a good round sum that within a month you will be as happy and contented as any woman need wish to be."

"A month!" I repeated.

"Yes, Mabel; I must have the ten thousand within a week. Sir Geoffrey is impatient; and if you are to be his wife, I see no reason to delay the matter."

About noon the next day, the servant brought me Sir Geoffrey's card. He was in the dining-room waiting to see me.

I looked in the glass; my face was white as marble. I called up all my resolution and descended the stairs.

His manner was grave and courteous, and he was altogether in better form than I had ever seen him before. This at least was a relief; had he shown his usual effusiveness, I am afraid my resolution would have given way.

"I know," he said, "you do not love me—

may, that you even dislike me; but I have no fear of not winning your affections. A wife must have a very hard heart, if a devoted husband who will anticipate her every wish cannot win it, and I am sure your heart is not hard. It may have been too impressionable at times."

The last words were spoken so significantly, and accompanied by a glance that told me my secret was known to him; and if he had been in doubt, I should have betrayed myself by the hot flush that overspread my pallor.

He had uttered the first part of his speech with such unaffected earnestness, that my heart had quite softened to him; but the last sentence spoiled all. Had he not been very deficient in tact, he would not have been guilty of such an indelicacy.

"I have no reason to dislike you, Sir Geoffrey," I answered.

"Your uncle," he went on, not noticing this speech, "has delighted me with the hope that you will not plead for any delay to my happiness. I am sure you have no more wish for an ostentatious marriage than I have; and all the circumstances of our relative positions considered—I mean, of course, in regard to the Avondell estate—the more private it is, the better. Most people will regard such a union as the most natural thing in the world—as a very good adjustment of rival claims. May I, then, fix Thursday next for the happy day?"

"I thought it was the lady's privilege to fix the day. Is that the one on which my uncle's liabilities become due?"

He colored up at that question, but answered, quietly, "I think it is."

On Thursday next, and this was Saturday!

Although Mrs. Harding did not disapprove of the match, she was very indignant at the hasty manner in which it was to be celebrated. Of course I had not explained to her the necessity.

"I'll venture to assert," she said, "that from the day that Sir Guy fought at the battle of Agincourt, there has never been the like of it. The marriage of an Avondell has always been a great event to all the country round—a time of festivity and rejoicing. I don't like it, Miss Etheridge; I don't like it. It looks as if the old house was going to the dogs."

Think on what was coming I dared not, nor remain a moment alone. I was always in motion, always talking, always in a state of feverish excitement. I often saw my uncle's eyes with an uneasy look in them; but I never encouraged him to speak. I could not endure the thought of any conversation upon the subject.

Once, indeed, I was half tempted to throw myself at his feet, and tell him my heart was irrevocably given to another; but could I see

him ruined? No; the sacrifice must be made!

Mrs. Harding and my uncle undertook the purchase of my *trousseau*, and all other things connected with the event, even to the selection of my dress.

I am sure my uncle was very much troubled in his mind when he saw that my aversion to the marriage did not in the least diminish; but he consoled himself with the reflection that all this must change very soon.

On the Tuesday I received another visit from Sir Geoffrey. He came to say that, with my permission, he should like to have the nuptials celebrated in Avondell Church.

"They tell me," he said, "that from the time the family first settled in Kent, there has never been one married out of the old church, and I have no desire to break up the tradition; indeed, I am superstitious enough to think it would be ill-omened."

What did it matter to me where the sacrifice took place? And, if a choice had been possible to me, I should have selected the place proposed in preference to any other.

It was arranged that we—that is, my uncle and myself—should go down to Avondell on the Wednesday night, while Sir Geoffrey would sleep at an hotel in the neighboring town.

He brought me a magnificent present of diamonds—fit, my uncle said, for a queen.

Yet they had no luster in my eyes; were but the glittering manacles that were to bind me to life-long misery.

But my future husband did not seem to be in the least way ruffled by my coldness or indifference, and I could not help thinking that either his love must be very great, or that he was wearing a mask.

CHAPTER IX.

A MEETING.

So it was my last day of liberty; to-morrow my bondage was to begin.

When Sir Geoffrey took his leave, I felt so restless that, after wandering about from room to room for some time, and finding the air of the house oppressive, and the sense of restraint intolerable, I left word that my uncle was not to wait dinner for me, and went out.

I had no definite purpose, but wandered on at random, trying to escape from myself—or, rather, from my thoughts. I took no heed of the route I was pursuing; had a confused impression of passing vehicles and hurrying people; of turning now into some quiet street, now, again, into some main artery; until, at length, after I know not how long, it occurred to me to consider where I had got to.

The summer twilight, as we see it in London, was just dying in the smoky haze of

the coming night, when I found myself in a square of old-fashioned, gloomy-looking houses. I asked a servant-girl, who was standing at one of the doors, the name of the place.

"Fitzroy Square," she answered.

Even then I had but a dim idea as to where I was. "How far am I from Islington?" I inquired.

"Oh, a mile or more; but, if you take that turning," pointing to an opening, "it'll bring you into the Euston Road; then turn to your right, and it's a straight line to the Angel."

I had just turned round to follow these directions, when I almost ran against a gentleman.

"I beg—" I began; then stopped short.

"Can it be Miss Avondell?" exclaimed the stranger.

It was Adrien Sylvester.

After that ejaculation, we stood for some seconds in an embarrassing silence.

"What a strange meeting!" he said, at length.

"It is, very," I answered.

My heart was beating wildly. With a passing "Good-evening," I would have hurried on, but my feet remained rooted to the spot.

"How long have you been in town?" he inquired, after another awkward pause.

"We remained at Avondell only two or three days after you left," I answered.

"Indeed! That was very sudden, was it not? You had no intention—at least, you did not mention it—of leaving when I was there?"

"Is it possible? have you not heard?" I exclaimed.

"Heard what?" he inquired. "I have heard nothing of Avondell since I left it."

"I am no longer mistress of Avondell; I am now only Miss Etheridge," I replied.

My embarrassment was now rapidly disappearing, since we had found a subject to converse upon.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, with an energy that caused a passer-by to turn round, and stare at us.

"If," he said, "we were to cross over to the side of the inclosure, we might converse more freely. May I offer you my arm? For Heaven's sake, explain this mystery to me!"

"Is it possible," I said, as we began to walk slowly round the inclosure, "that you have not heard that a son of the late Sir Geoffrey has come to light, proved his birth, and taken possession of the estate and title?"

"A son of the late Sir Geoffrey?" he repeated.

"Yes; it was in all the newspapers."

"I did not see it; and this man is now at Avondell?"

"Yes; and on Thursday morning I am to become his wife."

I blurted out the sentence as quickly as I was able. I could not endure that there should be a moment's misapprehension between us now.

His arm dropped from mine as if it had been suddenly struck down, and he stared at me with a blank look upon his face.

Then, grasping one of the railings, his head drooped forward upon his chest.

Knowing not what to say or do, I remained silent, although I yearned to speak.

Suddenly he looked up, and said, "Do you love him?"

"No."

"Do you marry him, then, for the sake of regaining the estate?"

"Yes," I replied, after a pause.

What else could I say without betraying my uncle's position?—and that I had no right to do to a stranger.

A look of questioning wonder was succeeded by one of almost contempt.

It stung me, and I added, with some bitterness, "You rejected the love that was offered you through pride."

"I make no claim," he answered, mournfully.

In these words there was a yet sharper sting; they mortified me—humiliated me; and I could scarcely repress the angry tears that were swelling in my throat. It was as though he had a second time refused the love I had been so unmaidenly as to almost thrust upon him.

At that moment I felt glad that I was about to become the wife of another.

"This marriage is very hasty," he added, immediately.

"I am anxious to return to Avondell," I replied, lightly.

"I wish you could delay it," he answered, quickly.

"Oh, quite impossible; everything is prepared."

"I am sorry for it," he replied, sadly.

No woman likes a faint heart in man—more especially in a man to whom she has given encouragement. It is an insult—a reproach to her.

"Were I in his place," I thought, "I would not take the loss of the woman I loved so tamely."

I did not know him then.

"Good-by, Mr. Sylvester!" I said, holding out my hand, and not appearing to notice his last words.

"Good-by, Miss Avondell!" he answered, reluctantly; and would have retained my hand, but I snatched it brusquely away, and, without another word, hurried on.

Once I cast a surreptitious glance behind, and saw him standing on the same spot, just as I had left him.

As I entered the Euston Road, a cab hailed me. I got into it, and told the man to drive to Canonbury.

Then my tears found vent. Anger and mortification were their source.

"Thank Heaven," I murmured to myself, "this meeting has happened! It has disillusionized me! He has passed out of my life forever!"

It was nine o'clock when I arrived home.

I ran up-stairs to my room, bathed my swollen eyes, brushed my hair, and removed all traces of my recent agitation.

"Good gracious, child! where have you been?" exclaimed my uncle. "I was getting quite uneasy about you."

I don't know what excuse I made.

"What a color you have, and how your eyes are sparkling!" he remarked. "I have not seen you look so well for a long time!"

"It is the anticipation of my return to Avondell—of being once more called 'my lady!' I answered, gayly. "Would you not like some music, uncle dear?" I said.

And I sat down to the piano, and began to play and sing with a nerve and brilliancy I do not believe I had ever displayed in my life before.

"What ails you to-night, Mabel?" again asked my uncle, coming over to the piano, and regarding me with a curious expression, not unmixed with uneasiness.

"Would you not sooner see me in good spirits than moping and melancholy, as I have been these few days past?" I asked, laughing, and running over the keys of the piano.

"Yes; but you are unnaturally excited."

"One extreme is usually succeeded by another," I answered, oracularly, and began to sing another song.

I could feel his gaze fixed upon me all the time. He could not at all understand it.

CHAPTER X.

THE LEGEND OF THE CURSE.

MY high spirits evaporated during the night, and the morning found me listless and heavy-eyed once more. Into my mind there had intruded a thought that I might have misjudged Adrien Sylvester—that I had felt angry with him because he was nobler, more unselfish, more sensitive to honor than the ordinary race of mankind. But I relentlessly crushed the suggestion. What good could it do now? Better far that I should think the worst of him than have any lingering doubts festering in my mind to poison my future life.

When I came down to breakfast, my uncle met me with more than his usual affection.

"I am glad to see you a little calmer this morning," he said. "Do you know you quite alarmed me last night?"

"You were alarmed to see me in good spirits?" I said, smiling.

"They were not natural spirits, Mabel."

After a silence of some minutes, during which he absently chipped an egg, he spoke again.

"I am afraid I have put your duty and affection to a severe test in this marriage," he said.

"Do not talk of that," I replied, quickly.

"If you still look forward to this match with aversion—with a conviction that it will render you unhappy—tell me so frankly and fearlessly. It is not too late even now. I would not have your young life made miserable."

Had he spoken those words to me four-and-twenty hours previously, my fortitude, I believe, would have given way; but the words, "I make no claim," came back upon my memory to strengthen me with bitterness; and I broke in calmly with "I am quite willing to marry Sir Geoffrey Avondell. I have no desire whatever not to do so. It is entirely of my own free will."

"You don't know what a burden you have taken off me by those words, my dear Mabel!" he said, pressing me in his arms. "I have worried over the matter until I was beginning to believe I was a domestic tyrant, a sort of ogre, a stony-hearted parent, and I don't know what. Now I feel quite happy again. I am sure you are doing the right thing. Such a match is not to be lightly rejected by a portionless girl."

It was late in the afternoon when we left London by the Ludgate Hill Station for Avondell. Mrs. Harding accompanied us. She was going down there to settle, and begged to be allowed to dress me for my bridal as she dressed the late Sir Geoffrey's mother. I was only too pleased to have such a faithful attendant with me at such an hour.

The journey was little more than thirty miles, and the sun was still shining brilliantly when we arrived.

Sir Geoffrey was, of course, there with a carriage waiting to convey us to the house.

At the sight of him, all the old repugnance returned. But, catching my uncle's gaze fixed upon me, I overcame my emotion, and met Sir Geoffrey with a smile.

"Do you see nothing, dear?" he said.

I looked around, and perceived that the station was decorated with festoons of flowers and some flags.

"That is in honor of to-morrow," he whispered. "It is to be quite a local event, I assure you. Short as your stay was among them, the people took a great fancy to you, and are immensely delighted that you are to be their mistress, after all."

There was a good number of loiterers outside the station door, who gave a very hearty cheer as I stepped into the carriage.

"Heaven bless her, she's as beautiful as an angel!" I heard an old woman say. "May she have all the happiness that I wish her, and I'm sure she'll have enough!"

I was trembling like a leaf when I took my seat beside my uncle—the thought of a demonstration was dreadful to me.

Dinner was waiting for us. Sir Geoffrey placed me next to him. His manner was unexceptionally gentle, but never obtrusive. No person present who had been ignorant of the circumstances would ever have imagined that we were shortly to enter into such close relationship with one another. Yet there was no coldness in his manner. I felt grateful to him for this consideration.

After dinner, he rose to take his leave.

"A few hours more, and I shall be the happiest man in the county of Kent," he whispered. "Good-night, my darling!"

He had both my hands clasped in his, and he now drew me to him, and kissed my lips.

How hard I tried to repress a shiver, but did not succeed; and was conscious that he felt it, for a dark look suddenly succeeded the passionate one of the previous moment. But it vanished as instantaneously, as he bowed and left the room.

All within the house was bustle and preparation for the morrow; and, after we left the dining-room, the servants began to prepare for the breakfast.

"It will be worthy of the old family, after all!" cried Mrs. Harding, enthusiastically. "All the villagers will be out for miles around, and there will be such a concourse as the old church has not witnessed for many a long day."

"I am sorry for it," I said.

"Sorry!" ejaculated the old lady, almost forgetting her respect. "Would you have an Avondell married like some common person? If that was the case, I should indeed think that Lady Bridget's curse was about to fall upon the old house."

"Lady Bridget's curse—what is that?" inquired my uncle, who was present.

"Ah! you have not heard that story," I remarked. "Then I will tell it you."

It was just the time for such a ghastly story, in the mysterious gloaming of a summer's night, a dark purple sky, with here and there a twinkling star, upon which the woods cast their deep shadows. The birds had all gone to rest, and not the sound even of a shaking leaf came through the open windows. Within the spacious room all was dim obscurity. The influence of the hour and the scene was upon me; and, drawing my chair very close to my

uncle's, I began, in an awed and subdued tone.

"In the reign of Charles the Second, Sir Gilbert Avondell fell in love with a young maiden of humble birth, whose father, during the troubles of the Commonwealth, had sheltered him, and saved him from arrest. She was very beautiful, and with a distinguished air and manner that might have become the finest lady in the land, although, as I have said, her parentage was of the humblest, her father being only a working man. Love and gratitude both prompted Sir Gilbert to marry her; and, for some years, they lived very happily together. But there was one cause of discontent that, year by year, became more serious. Lady Avondell bore no heir to the name and estate, which at Sir Gilbert's death, would consequently pass to his brother, and to his brother's children. Sir Gilbert was now ever reproaching her with this, and declaring that it was a judgment upon him.

" 'The pure blood of Avondell will not mingle with your muddy stream!' he said, arrogantly.

"For a long time she bore these cruel taunts with patience; but her nature was as proud as his, and after a time she rebelled, and gave him scorn for scorn. Then dreadful scenes ensued. One day the brutal husband raised his hand, and struck her upon the breast. From that hour they lived in separate apartments, and no communication of any kind passed between them.

"But far more dire even than this were the effects of the blow. It produced a cancer of a very virulent kind, which caused her the most dreadful agony. For two or three years she endured a life of constant torture. At length, the end came. One night a servant brought a message to Sir Gilbert that Lady Avondell was dying, and requested to see him. At first he refused to go to her; but ere the messenger had left the room, his conscience touched him, and he went.

"It was a terrible sight that met his eyes upon entering the chamber of death. His lady was propped up in the bed by pillows; and what a change had taken place since last he saw her! The once fair, round face was little more than the bony profile of a skull, over which was drawn a livid, parchment skin; the once rosy lips were bloodless and fallen in from the want of teeth; the sparkling eyes lurked dimly within their cavernous depths; and, to make the contrast more terrible, she had arrayed herself in her bridal costume, and encircled her ragged gray hairs, that had once rivalled the raven's wing in blackness, with a chaplet of orange blossoms.

"Sir Gilbert started back, horrified.

"She gave a low, bitter laugh.

" 'What!' she murmured; 'are you frightened at your own work?'

"Then, bursting forth with startling energy, she invoked a terrible curse upon him and his house, pronounced with the air and certainty of a prophetess.

" 'Never,' she cried, 'shall a child be born to you; but your heritage shall go to the man you hate! From this hour a blight shall fall upon your race; never shall they know happiness more, and the name of Avondell shall pass to the stranger, and be borne by the outcast whom no man will own! Then shall the pride of your house be struck down, and leveled with the dust!'

"Then, with a low, wailing scream, she fell back, and expired."

As I uttered the last words, my uncle started; and, wrought up by the legend I was relating, I could feel my face blanch, and my hair stir; for upon the deathlike silence of the night there broke a shriek, just such as I was describing—low, wailing, as of some soul in its last agony.

"What was that?" inquired my uncle, in an awe-struck voice.

"Mercy on us! what could it be?" ejaculated Mrs. Harding, who was standing behind my chair.

We listened breathlessly.

All was again silent.

"It must have been an owl, or some other night-bird," suggested my uncle.

"I never heard any night-bird utter such an awful sound as that," replied Mrs. Harding, trembling. "It was like the voice of some evil spirit. Lor' 'a' mercy upon us!—there it is again!"

But this time it was a shriek of laughter. It seemed to come from a long way off, and ceased very suddenly.

I and Mrs. Harding crept close together, overcome by terror.

My uncle sprang up, and rung the bell violently.

Several minutes elapsed before the summons was answered; for we were in a room of the suite of apartments which had formerly been mine, and which was far away from the part of the house where all the servants were congregated.

When the footman appeared, he brought lights, thinking it was for those we had rung.

"What noise was that just now?" demanded my uncle.

"Noise, sir?" inquired the man.

"There was a shriek, as if some one was being hurt, and then a laugh like a maniac's."

"I never heard anything, sir; I have been in another part of the house. I daresay it was the owls; they do make a dreadful noise out in the woods sometimes."

"Go and inquire among your fellow-servants if they heard anything. Stay! I will go myself."

"Oh, don't leave us!" I cried.

"Stay with your lady until I return," he said to the man, and hurried away.

He was gone some time, during which we maintained an almost breathless silence, expecting every moment that the same or some other awful sound would break upon us.

But all was silent again.

When he returned, he sent the footman away, and then told us that he had questioned every person in the house, but no one had heard it.

"There is nothing astonishing in that, however," he added, "for they are making noise enough to drown a thunder-storm. I believe it must have been the owls, after all."

"It seemed like an echo to the words I was speaking," I said, shuddering—"as though the spirit of the unhappy woman whose story I was telling was hovering round the scene of her former misery, and rejoicing in the coming fulfillment of her curse."

"I am surprised at you, Mabel, entertaining such silly ideas!" he answered, irritably. "We might expect them from your maid, but not from an educated lady. Every old house and family has its legends and its curses, and its ghosts and superstitions. I wonder they don't say she walks; that her spirit is seen at certain times—"

"Oh, sir, don't make a jest of things so awful!" interposed Mrs. Harding.

"You had better go to bed, Mabel," he said, "or you will be ill to-morrow."

"Sleep with me to-night!" I whispered to the housekeeper.

"I should be too pleased, my lady, for I do not think I could dare to sleep alone," she replied.

"But no more horrors," said my uncle. "Don't terrify yourselves further by dwelling upon this subject, and raking up all the horrible stories you can possibly remember, which people usually do under such circumstances. Depend upon it, the explanation is simple enough. The darkness, the silence, and the story had brought us into that electrical condition that the slightest sound was certain to be magnified into something ghostly or portentous; and so the caw of some belated crow, or the scream of some sour-tempered owl, became exaggerated, in our imagination, into the cry of an evil spirit."

He spoke lightly, jestingly; but I felt certain that he was not so easy as he pretended to be.

"There! good-night, dear! Heaven bless you, and protect you from all evils, fancied or real! I shall not go to bed before I have investigated this matter further."

I threw myself, sobbing passionately, into his arms.

"This won't do, Mabel," he said, a little severely; "this is childish."

"Oh, it is not that!" I exclaimed. "But to-morrow—"

I could proceed no further.

"Yes," he said, understanding me, "this is the last night of my guardianship. Henceforth you will belong to another."

Here his own voice gave way; and, unable to any longer endure the painful scene, he led me to the door, and passed me to Mrs. Harding, who was standing without.

I sobbed myself to sleep on the good old creature's breast, and slumbered until she aroused me next morning.

My uncle came early to my dressing-room.

He looked pale and heavy-eyed, as though he had not slept all night.

I remarked upon it.

"Well," he answered, "I did not go to bed until daylight. I and some of the servants searched the house from top to bottom, hoping to find some clew to that noise we heard last night. But nothing came of it. Then I went into the woods to listen for the owls."

"And did you hear them?" I asked.

"Oh, yes; and am quite convinced it was they who frightened us."

"I hope the rain will keep off—at least, until the ceremony is over," he said, turning to the window, and looking up at the dark, lowering sky. "There will be a great concourse of people, and I should not like them to get a drenching. I think, however, the wind is too high just at present for the rain to come down. If it lulls we shall have rain to a certainty."

CHAPTER XI.

A WEDDING AND ITS SEQUEL.

At ten o'clock the carriage arrived to convey me to the church. I was ready and waiting. Only myself and uncle started from the house; the bridesmaids were to meet us at the church. There were only two, friends of mine, who had come down from London by a late train the previous night, and slept at a hotel.

Mrs. Harding, the butler and my own maid preceded us in another carriage hired in the village.

"I am glad it is not a sunny morning!" I whispered to the housekeeper as I stood in the hall.

"Good gracious! why, my lady?" she asked.

"Because it would have seemed as if the very heavens were mocking me," I answered.

"Now it seems as though they were sad."

As the carriage rolled on, I know not what I felt, except that it was no strong emotion. It was the lethargy of a dream. I was scarcely

conscious even of the event that was about to happen; mind and memory were a blank.

I gazed listlessly through the closed windows upon the gray, somber, wind-swept landscape; upon the rocking trees, through which the wind howled dismally; upon the grazing cattle and sheep; and upon the people plodding along the road, through the blinding dust, in the same direction, of whom all the men took off their hats, and all the women courtesied as we passed.

As we drew nearer, the clang of the joy-bells was borne upon the blast.

At that sound I shivered.

My uncle, who had been fixedly and anxiously regarding me, took my hand.

"Mabel, my child," he said, "you look more like a vestal going to take the veil than a bride. There is a look in your face which makes me feel a guilty man. If this marriage brings you unhappiness, it will break my heart, for it has all been my doing."

"I dare say I shall be very happy," I answered, wearily.

At that moment we entered upon a lane of people who lined the road on each side to the church, which was still nearly a mile distant, and who cheered more lustily as we drove between them, thus rendering further conversation impossible.

We drew up at the old lych-gate, where Sir Geoffrey was waiting with the bridesmaids and bridesmen. He assisted me to alight, pressed my hand, and whispered a compliment.

I saluted the ladies and gentlemen, and the crowd pressed forward to catch a glimpse of me. Then I took my uncle's arm, and we walked slowly up the long lime-tree avenue, the village girls strewing the path with flowers before me.

But it was all unreal—like a dream. I looked neither to the left nor to the right, and my face was expressionless as marble. How cold and proud, how haughty and disdainful they must have thought me!

Passing beneath the low Norman porch, we entered the small, ancient building. Then there was a rush; in a few moments it was crammed with people, and the doors had to be closed in the faces of numbers who still pressed for admittance.

I stood before the altar, with my icy hand grasped in his hot, feverish one, and took the vow to love, honor and obey one man, when my heart was given to another.

Ah, the agony of that moment when the irrevocable words were spoken which raised an eternal barrier between me and love—which rendered the very thought of it a crime; and yet his image would stand between me and my husband! I tried with all my might to banish it, but it was the one vivid, *real* thing that was about me!

I could have burst into shrieks of laughter, but my eyelids burned as though the very source of tears had been forever stopped.

At length the ceremony was over. I felt *my husband's* kiss upon my lips; then I had a hazy sensation of people pressing forward with eager congratulations, of signing my name in a book, a great crowd, of shouts and bell-ringing, and then finding myself alone in the carriage with *my husband*.

I heard afterward that it had been generally remarked that they had never seen a young bride so calm and self-possessed, and one observed that it might have been supposed that such an event was an every-day occurrence to me, so indifferent did I seem about it.

Then came the breakfast. Here, again, my remembrances are all confused. A number of people, a buzz of conversation, the popping of champagne corks, some speech-making, a moving to and fro of servants. This is all I can recall.

Until suddenly I saw the door dash open, and a white-faced, affrighted man rush into the room, exclaiming, "Sir Geoffrey—gentlemen—the house is on fire!"

All sprung to their feet, and made for the door. I felt myself carried away by the crowd into the open air.

Then an appalling sight met our eyes. From the windows of that part of the building furthest from the dining-room, and in which Sir Geoffrey's private apartments were situated, flames were darting and volumes of smoke rolling, while a strong wind, which blew from that direction, was sweeping them toward us.

The rapidity with which the fire increased was marvelous; tongues of flame borne by the gale advanced with great rapidity, until the dense black smoke surrounded the whole place.

It was soon apparent that no effort could save it—that the mansion and all its contents were doomed.

I heard cries on all sides of "Is there any one left inside?"

"No, no; everybody is out," half a dozen voices replied.

But as if in contradiction to the answer, there suddenly rose above the roar of the flame a long, wailing shriek.

It came from that part of the building in which the conflagration had originated.

All my lethargy had disappeared before these horrors and excitement, and I cried out, "Oh, there is some poor creature! Save her—save her!" for the voice was that of a woman.

Sir Geoffrey, with his arms clasped round me, had hitherto remained an almost passive spectator of the scene. He had forbidden the servants to endeavor to save any thing.

"I won't have lives risked for a few paltry

pictures or articles of furniture. Nothing can save the place, and it's no use trying," he said.

But when that shriek rose, I felt him start.

"Whoever it may be," he shouted, "they are beyond all human aid. It is madness to attempt their rescue; better one should perish than half a dozen!"

But no one heard this callous counsel, the sound of which made me shrink away from him. He did not heed the motion, did not seem conscious of it, for his previous phlegm had suddenly given place to an excitement quite as marked.

Everybody had rushed in the direction of the sound, leaving me standing alone.

The wind, beating the smoke about in all directions, rendered objects within a few feet of us sometimes invisible, always obscure.

Seemingly forgetful of my presence altogether, he turned his back upon me, and was fixedly staring toward the crowd.

Now the black smoke assumed a lurid hue, and was full of fiery sparks, and the blasts of heat became so intolerable that I was obliged to retreat close against the balustrades.

But Sir Geoffrey never moved, although the sparks were flying all round him, until a loud cheer broke from the shouting, swaying crowd, and there was a movement as though something fresh had happened.

"Ah," I exclaimed, "they have saved the poor creature!"

My exclamation reached Sir Geoffrey's ears; he turned round, and cast upon me a glance full of fury, then ran forward.

Four men were bearing something, dead or alive, toward the steps that led down into the woods.

I could no longer repress my curiosity, but rushed forward into the jostling mass.

"Alive?" I asked, eagerly.

"We don't know," some one replied.

"Who is it?" I again asked.

"We don't know at all. Nobody belonging to the house," was again the reply.

I stood leaning against the balustrade upon the top step, and as those who bore the body slowly descended, could look over their heads.

It looked to be only a bundle of half-burned rags, with a face, blackened by fire, emerging from them.

Yet I instantly recognized the features as those of the *woman in gray*.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE GAMEKEEPER'S COTTAGE.

THEY bore her through the woods to Johnson, the gamekeeper's cottage, that being the nearest place of shelter.

It was a wild looking *cortège*. All the ladies except my two friends had taken to flight.

The servants and the wedding-guests were backened with smoke; several without coats. There was also an immense crowd of country-people, who had come to Avondell to partake of the feasting and festivities which had been so terribly interrupted, and numbers of others, who had seen the flames in the distance, came flocking through the woods, each moment swelling the concourse.

Suddenly I felt my arm grasped.

It was my uncle.

His clothes were torn, his hands and face scorched. It was he who had rescued the unfortunate creature.

"Where is Sir Geoffrey?—how has he left you alone?" he asked.

"I don't know. He was on the terrace a few moments ago," I answered, looking around. But he was nowhere to be seen.

"Very strange!" muttered my uncle.

Then, putting his arm around me, he said, sadly, "This is a terrible wedding-day for you, my poor child!"

I shuddered, but made no reply.

There were two medical men among the guests, and upon reaching Johnson's cottage they peremptorily forbade any one entering with the body except the men who bore it, and myself and uncle.

"But where is Sir Geoffrey?" inquired one. "He may be able to identify this poor woman."

"Here he is, sir!" answered a voice from the skirt of the crowd, which now shifted a little to allow him to come to the front.

I thought there was a reluctance in his manner as he advanced, but that might have been fancy.

We now entered the cottage, and the body was laid upon a bed.

"Do you know this woman, Sir Geoffrey?" inquired one of the doctors, while the other applied himself to ascertain if any life yet remained.

"No," he replied, without glancing in that direction.

"She was found in a vaulted chamber, of which none of the servants knew the existence."

"Then how should I, who have only just entered upon possession of the house, be expected to know of it?" replied Sir Geoffrey, irritably, and turning away to the window.

The doctor looked surprised at his tone and manner.

But at that moment his colleague drew his attention by exclaiming, "She is living!"

I saw sir Geoffrey start, and look round quickly; then again turn to the window, outside of which the crowd was pressing and peering, to try and get a glimpse of what was taking place within.

He seemed to ignore or forget my existence, at least, he took no notice of me. I could see my uncle's sharp, angry glances cast upon him.

"My child," he said, "this is no place for you. Sir Geoffrey, is there no conveyance by which Lady Avondell may be taken to some house or inn, or place more fitted for her than this?"

"A carriage cannot be brought into a wood!" he answered, insolently. "Lady Avondell will have to walk for half a mile. There will be one waiting directly to take us to the station."

"Surely you are not going away?—not going to leave Avondell in the midst of this dreadful calamity?" exclaimed my uncle.

"Oh, no, no! I could not go away now!" I cried, clinging to him.

"That is as *I* please now!" replied Sir Geoffrey, with a malignant sneer. "You are my wife; and, however much you may hate me, will have to do as *I* choose!"

At these words, my poor uncle grew as white as death; and I heard him murmur to himself, "Oh, Heaven! this is my work!"

I pressed his arm and whispered, "You should not notice what he says now; he is excited, naturally. It is a dreadful calamity, remember. Then, turning to Sir Geoffrey, and anxious to prevent a scene, I said, "I am ready to go. The ground is quite dry, and the air is warm; I shall not take any harm."

He cast an irresolute glance toward the bed.

"Is the woman likely to survive?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes; I think so," replied one of the doctors. "She has sustained no serious injury by the fire, although the smoke was rapidly killing her. She is recovering."

"That is the poor woman I was speaking to you about, Sir Geoffrey," I said.

"Yes; I know," he answered, quickly. Then, turning to the doctors, said, "She is a mad-woman—quite mad. You must not attach any importance to anything she may say. I will give orders to have her conveyed to the union at once."

"She cannot be moved at present," replied one of the doctors, quietly.

"Nonsense! What is all this fuss about a mad vagrant, who has had to sleep under hedges all her life?"

"She is a human creature, and should be treated as such!" interposed my uncle, sternly.

"What is it to you? I am master here—not you!" retorted Sir Geoffrey, fiercely.

Indignation and astonishment were imprinted on every face. What a change had suddenly come over this man! The polished baronet had suddenly been transformed into a coarse, bullying ruffian.

"Come, madam!" he said, to me; "the coach will be waiting for us."

"It will have to wait, then!" said my uncle, placing his back against the door. "My niece does not go until I have had some private conversation with you!"

"If it is the money, to save you from bankruptcy, you want, and for which you sold your niece to me, I have a check for it in my pocket-book."

While he spoke he was taking out his book, and, at the last word, presented the check.

My uncle snatched it from his hand, tore it to shreds, and threw it in his face.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, trembling with passion. "But she shall not go with you!"

"We'll see about that!" said Sir Geoffrey, livid with passion.

And he grasped my wrist so firmly that I could not repress a cry of pain.

With a passionate ejaculation, my uncle raised his arm; and in another moment the two men would have been at blows, had not one of the doctors interposed.

"Sir Geoffrey," he said, "this is very extraordinary behavior. Pray collect yourself. You have hurt Lady Avondell."

"What's that about Lady Avondell?" broke in a hoarse voice. "There's only one Lady Avondell, and I am she!"

Every head simultaneously turned toward the bed, and there was the woman in gray, sitting upright, and gazing wildly about her.

"Ay, Lady Geoffrey Avondell!" she repeated, with a vacant laugh; "not quite so beautiful, nor so finely dressed as I used to be; but if I was only a poor tradesman's daughter, and am now old, ugly, and in rags, that can't untie the knot the parson made, and I am still Lady Avondell!"

"Ah! don't let him harm me," she cried, with a sudden change of voice, and pointing to Sir Geoffrey, upon whom her eyes had that moment fallen. "Though he's my own son, he's treated me cruel, cruel, cruel!"

Her voice fell to a whisper.

"He tried to smother me in Paris! He thought he had. Then, when he found me here, he had me shut up in a cellar. But I've had my revenge! Hark!"

And she clutched the arm of the doctor, who stood beside her, and drew her mouth close to his ear.

"'Twas I set fire to the house. Ha, ha, ha! It's gone now—dust and ashes; the curse is fulfilled. The proud house is leveled with the dust, and the name of the accursed race is borne by the outcast that no man owns though Sir Geoffrey did cast me off to avert a—to—"

Here her voice died away, and she fell back upon the pillow, where she lay half insensible, and uttering low moans.

It would be impossible to describe the effect of her words upon those present.

Consternation and unutterable astonishment were expressed upon every countenance, and every glance turned instinctively upon Sir Geoffrey.

No marble was ever whiter than his face; but it bore a look of insolent defiance.

"I told you," he said, with a laugh, "she would make some extraordinary assertions. Mad people always fancy themselves great personages."

"I do not remember you saying anything of the kind," replied one of the doctors, quietly.

"Then you have a bad memory," retorted Sir Geoffrey, savagely, and conscious of the blunder he had committed. "You will tell me next you believe her story, I suppose. Well, at all events, if she is Lady Avondell, she has acknowledged me to be her son, that is one comfort."

Before any one could reply, a voice was heard outside the door, saying: "Is there a Mr. Etheridge here?"

"Yes," replied my uncle. "What is it?"

"Here's a telegraphic message for you, sir."

He opened the door, and a countryman handed him a brown envelope.

He tore it open, and read the contents.

I saw his features change.

"Good Heavens! what can it mean?" he muttered. "Who gave me this?"

"I did, sir. It was given me by one of the servants just now. He said it came early this morning, and he quite forgot to give it to you, sir."

"Heaven knows what misery his neglect will cause!" exclaimed my uncle, passionately.

"What is it—any bad news?" I inquired, anxiously.

"Very bad, I fear," he replied.

He hesitated for a moment, then passed me the telegram, with the remark, "I do not see why I should keep it from you."

It was from his lawyers, and contained these words:

"We are requested by Messrs. Strickland and Carey, highly respectable solicitors, from whom we have received a communication that justifies us in doing so, to send you this message. 'Delay your niece's marriage to the latest moment possible; something may happen to break it off.'"

The paper would have fallen from my hand had not my uncle caught it.

"What is all this about?" Sir Geoffrey demanded, brusquely.

"That is my business," replied my uncle.

"As it seems to concern *my wife*, it is mine, also!"

Here, fortunately, the dispute was again interrupted by a man who pushed his way

through the crowd that surrounded the door, and came up almost breathless with running.

"Some gentleman at the 'Avondell Arms' wants to see Mr. Etheridge directly," he said. "I've been running about this hour and more trying to find 'im. Is he here?"

"I am Mr. Etheridge," replied my uncle. "Come, Mabel—come with me."

"No; she goes with me," said Sir Geoffrey, advancing.

"Not after what this telegram has told me. Do you wish to make me read it aloud before all the people, villain, impostor?"

It was a shot fired only by guess, but it told.

Sir Geoffrey quailed before it.

"Well, I'll have no scene here. But she's my wife, whatever I may be," he answered, defiantly; "and where she goes, I go!"

When we emerged from the cottage, the whole air was impregnated with the smell of fire, and dim with smoke; and we could, although half a mile distant, hear the roaring of the flames, which were still raging with increasing fury.

We had scarcely passed from the trees into the open, when we heard loud cries behind us, and a crowd of panic-stricken people running at full speed.

"The wood's on fire—the wood's on fire!" was shrieked on all sides.

And, surely enough, we heard a gathering and awful roar, distant at first, then growing nearer and nearer, mingled with a fierce crackling sound, until we saw a sheet of fire advancing with lightning speed along the ground, devouring brushwood and fern, and leaping up the trunks of the great trees. A long continuance of hot, dry weather had parched and withered up the vegetation, rendering it an easy prey, and threatening the woods with a destruction as complete as the house.

A carriage was waiting in the high road, and into this Sir Geoffrey, myself, and my uncle stepped; and, with that awful roar in our ears, and with volumes of pungent smoke pursuing us, we rolled on toward the village hotel.

Upon arriving there, we were told that the three gentlemen who desired to see Mr. Etheridge were in a private room up-stairs.

My uncle firmly held my hand, and Sir Geoffrey prepared to follow.

"I have private business with these gentlemen," said my uncle facing round.

"Leave my wife with me, then?"

"Not on any consideration!"

"Very well, then; where she goes, I go!"

"Be it so; perhaps you'll repent it!" answered my uncle, after a moment's hesitation.

We all three entered the room, to which a waiter conducted us.

There were three persons present. Two were elderly men, and strangers; the third was ADRIEN SYLVESTER.

A film gathered before my eyes, and I should have fallen, had I not clutched my supporter's arm.

"You are Messrs. Strickland and Carey, I presume?" said my uncle.

"We are, Mr. Etheridge."

"And this gentleman?"

"We will introduce him presently. You received our message?"

"Yes; but too late."

"Dear! how could that be? Then Miss Etheridge is married to the so-called Sir Geoffrey Avondell?"

"So-called! What do you mean?" exclaimed a fierce voice.

"Are you the person?" inquired one of the gentlemen.

"I am Sir Geoffrey Avondell."

"You mean you are the illegitimate son of Lady Geoffrey Avondell, born two years after her separation from her husband," was the quiet response.

For a moment the miserable impostor stared dumbfounded at the speaker. Then he began to bluster.

"I'll trounce you for this, my friend! It's all a conspiracy, got up by you, you old bankrupt, to extort money from me! But you sha'n't get a farthing—you shall rot in jail!"

The mask which had been dropping bit by bit since the fire, now fell entirely, and exposed the features of the low-bred ruffian.

"But whoever I may be," he added, with a sneering laugh, "as this woman's husband, I've got the Avondell property, and you'll find it a hard matter to dispossess me of that!"

"I don't think we shall," was the reply, uttered as calmly as before.

"What's the wife's is the husband's."

"But supposing it is not the wife's?"

"If I am not the heir, she is."

"Perhaps not."

"Then who is?"

"It may turn out to be *this gentleman!*" And the lawyer pointed to Adrien.

CHAPTER XIII.

SUNSHINE THROUGH THE CLOUDS.

THREE months have passed since the events described in the last chapter occurred.

The scene once more changes to our quiet home at Canonbury.

The summer is gone, and it is a chill autumn night.

Dinner has not been long finished, and my uncle is dozing in his easy-chair before the fire, while I and another are seated upon a couch, back in the shadows.

That other is Adrien Sylvester—or, rather, Sir Geoffrey Avondell, as he is now called.

The law has pronounced me to be still Miss Etheridge, and the marriage ceremony gone through with an impostor and a felon to be null and void.

Henri Butee, the name he was known under, had been the companion of his mother's wanderings in boyhood, but had left her when he was about fifteen, and entered upon a career of fraud and swindling in both France and England. Seven years elapsed before they met again. The unhappy woman had by this time become half crazed.

He had formerly heard her talk in her wild way of having once been the wife of an English baronet; but such assertions had scarcely been noticed by him at that time.

Now, however, when she began to tell him of her former wrongs, and call herself Lady Avondell, he drew the whole story from her.

How, when she found herself abandoned by her husband, she had rushed out at night with her infant in her arms, and in crossing one of the Paris bridges had been seized with the diabolical impulse to cast the child—*his child*—into the Seine; how some stranger had snatched it from her, and she had never heard anything of it from that hour.

Through all vicissitudes she had preserved the certificate of her marriage, of her child's baptism, and a number of souvenirs, which together formed a considerable mass of proofs.

He now conceived the idea of personating the lost son. All he required was some living witness who could identify his mother as Lady Avondell, and prove the birth of her child.

The man who could do this was one Simon Grant, who had been Sir Geoffrey's valet and his agent during the whole time of his connection with the unhappy woman who bore his name.

Henri advertised in all the French and English newspapers, and after some time the man was found.

He had mentioned no word of this scheme to his mother, of whose acquiescence in it he was doubtful, and the wandering state of whose mind would have rendered such a confidence imprudent.

Even her very existence was a danger to him.

One night he gave her a sleeping draught; then stopping up the chimney and every crevice of the room, lit a large pan of charcoal, and locked her in.

Fortunately, the fumes were smelt by the occupants of the next apartment, and the door was burst open in time to rescue the victim.

But of this the miserable matricide knew nothing. He never doubted the success of his murderous plot, and with his colleague and fellow-conspirator, was now on his way to England.

Upon arriving there they found that Sir Geoffrey Avondell had been dead about a fortnight, and that a distant relative had succeeded to the estate.

It would not prove interesting to enter into the details of the proofs and evidence that Henri Bautee placed in the hands of his lawyer to substantiate his claims; they were certainly very strong.

Had I chosen to bring them into a court of justice, to be sifted by clever counsel, they might not have stood such a test; but depending entirely upon the acumen of my solicitors, which was thoroughly at fault, I had declined to dispute his right, which wonderfully simplified matters for him.

But I now come to the strangest part of the story. Adrien Sylvester—my Adrien's father by adoption—was very fond of telling the story of how his "*cher fils*" was born to him, as he use to phrase it, and no person could be in his company half an hour without hearing it.

After he left Sir Geoffrey's service, Grant, who was a very finely-formed man, became an artist's model; and one day, while sitting for Sylvester, he heard him relate this adventure to some friends.

He had no conception at the time that the principal actress in it was Lady Avondell, his late mistress; he knew, as he was in her service at the time, that she and her infant had disappeared, leaving no clew behind, but nothing more.

When, some twenty years afterward, he again heard the story from her own lips, it seemed to him he had heard something very like it before. After puzzling his memory for some time, he caught the clew. There were many of Sylvester's old associates still living, whom he had no difficulty in tracing, or getting to relate to him the incidents just as the artist used to tell it. From them he learned that the young man had settled in London, and when he and Bautee came over to England, one of his first cares was to seek him out.

For it had occurred to Mr. Grant whether honesty would not be the safest policy, and whether it would not be more prudent to throw over the impostor, and take up the cause of the true man. At the time he instituted his inquiries Adrien was at Avondell, and it will be, perhaps, remembered that it was in consequence of receiving an intimation of these inquiries through a friend that he had returned to London. Not finding him on the spot at the time, it may be presumed that Grant

changed his mind, for Adrien heard no more of him.

But on the very evening when, miserable and disconsolate, Adrien returned to his lodgings, after our meeting in Fitzroy Square, he found a stranger waiting for him. That stranger was Simon Grant.

Bautee's motive in forcing me into a marriage—for we afterward discovered that he had bought up most of my uncle's liabilities at a premium, in order to become his principal creditor—was to legalize his own position; failing a direct line, I was next-of-kin, and, as my husband, he would, come what might, be the rightful possessor of Avondell.

But this did not suit Simon Grant, who, under such circumstances, would cease to have any power over him; and he had already experienced a foretaste of what he might expect in the cool contempt with which he had recently been treated, and by a refusal of one of his frequent demands for money.

Adrien's astonishment upon its being revealed to him that *he* was the real heir of Avondell may be imagined; but it was not until the next day, when, in Messrs. Strickland and Carey's office, Grant recapitulated his assertions, and backed them up by proofs, that Adrien dared attach any credence to the story.

The rest may be imagined. The unfortunate Lady Avondell died from the effects of the fire which she herself had kindled, but not before she had once more related, in the presence of several witnesses, how her infant had fallen into the hands of the French artist; how, after her son had left her to perish, her poor crazed brain had incited her to once more revisit the land of her birth—whether she really had any definite purpose in doing so it would be hard to say.

When Bautee saw the face of the mother whose death he believed he had secured, pressed against the window of the dining-room of Avondell House, his consternation may be imagined.

The next morning, Johnson, the gamekeeper, applied to be reinstated in his situation. His experience of the worst class of mankind told him that this man was capable of being made the tool of any villainy; and it was he whom he set to work, with certain instructions, to seek his miserable parent. One night he found her, half famished, in the woods, and brought her, as it had been arranged, to the private door leading to Bautee's private apartments.

It was Johnson who told him of the stone chamber, which, in old times, had been used as a place of concealment. It was impossible for any one long to survive in such a place, to which no ray of light ever penetrated—to

which air was only admitted by a kind of shaft, down which the occupant had to be lowered, and by which she received her food in the same fashion. Thus he hoped to destroy her without committing actual murder. By some means it would appear that she succeeded in clambering up this shaft, which resembled a narrow chimney, the rugged surface of the stones giving her some foothold, and forcing the trap-door above, which opened into Bautee's bed-chamber.

It was on the morning of the marriage. All the doors were secured, and she could make no further egress. Finding herself still a prisoner, and actuated by revenge, she had set fire to the place; then, when the flames began to mount, had descended again into the stone chamber. It was her cries, when the smoke and fire began to invade even this sanctuary, that led to her discovery and rescue.

Bautee was secured by a detective when leaving the "Avondell Arms," for a series of frauds and crimes he had been carrying on for years, and soon after condemned to penal servitude for life.

But to return to the autumn evening on which I opened this chapter.

We had both been silent for some time, when I said, "Our love-story is the reversal of the old adage, for faint heart has won fair lady."

"My heart was not faint," he answered, lovingly. "From the first moment that I gazed into your dark blue eyes, as I saw them that night peeping inquiringly over Mrs. Harding's shoulder, you became my destiny. Never was there a truer case of love at first sight. I could not tear myself away from the place. I felt that I must see you once again, and, if possible, speak to you. An accident, which might have been my death, most strangely favored me. Then, day by day, I drank in your presence draughts of delicious poison. I felt that I was mad—that I was dooming myself to life-long misery; that, could you read my secret thoughts, you would

never allow me to look upon your face again. Then came the revelation of that never-to-be-forgotten night. How can I describe my delirious intoxication when I discovered that my passion was reciprocated? But when you had gone, the glamour was dissolved. I felt that I had acted like the basest of adventurers; your weakness gave me strength, and I fled. But, ah! what I suffered! I made up my mind never to see you again, never again to encounter the temptation of your eyes, for such an effort as I had made could be made but once in a man's life. All the sunshine—all the ambition was taken out of my future. I faced it doggedly, determinedly. But when I heard you were to become another's—if, on that same night, a gleam of hope had not broken upon me, I know not how it might have ended."

"How hard, and cold, and mercenary you must have thought me, when I told you I was about to marry a man for whom I confessed I had no love, merely to recover the estate?"

"I confess it was a blow to me; but—"

Here my uncle stirred in his chair, yawned, and called out, "Where are you, Mabel?"

And so broke up our confidences for that night.

Three months afterward, I and Geoffrey were married; but not in Avondell Church—the remembrances of my former wedding were too recent and too terrible.

The old house was burned to the ground; every part of it, and everything in it, perished; and the woods were also greatly injured by the fire.

Another residence has, however, risen upon the same site—not so grand, not so imposing as the old one; but let us hope that the vengeful spirit of the unhappy Lady Bridget has been at length appeased—and years of almost uninterrupted felicity in the society of the noblest and best of men give almost certainty to that hope; and we have every reason to believe that with the death of the Woman in Gray the shadow of the curse passed forever from the House of Avondell.

THE END.

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